

REVIEW ESSAY

Barbara L. Craig, Editor

“Clothing Facts in Words”: Archivists and the Holocaust

Jeffrey Mifflin

Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory.

Deborah E. Lipstadt. New York: Plume, 1994. ix, 278 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$11.95. ISBN: 0-452-27274-2.

Witness to the Holocaust: An Illustrated Documentary History of the Holocaust in the Words of its Victims, Perpetrators, and Bystanders.

Michael Berenbaum, ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1997. xxxiii, 364 pp. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. \$32.50. ISBN 0-06-270108-8.

“The Good Old Days”: The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders.

Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess, eds. New York: Free Press, 1991. xxi, 314 pp. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. \$22.95. ISBN: 0-02-917425-2.

Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution.”

Saul Friedlander, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992. 407 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$27.00. ISBN: 0-674-70766-4.

Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology.

Lawrence Langer, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. vi, 689 pp. Index. Illustrations. \$24.00. ISBN: 0-19-507732-6.

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Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary.

Avraham Tory. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990. xxiv, 554 pp. Index. Illustrations. \$16.95. ISBN: 0-674-85811-5.

The Boys: The Untold Story of 732 Young Concentration Camp Survivors.

Martin Gilbert. New York: Henry Holt, 1997. xv, 511 pp. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Maps. \$30.00. ISBN: 0-8050-4402-7.

Historical Atlas of the Holocaust.

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. New York: MacMillan/Simon and Schuster, 1996. 252 pp. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Maps. \$39.95. ISBN: 0-02-897451-4.

History of the Holocaust: A Handbook and Dictionary.

Abraham and Hershel Edelheit. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994. xix, 524 pp. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Maps. \$29.95. ISBN: 0-8133-2240-5.

The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian.

Raul Hilberg. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996. 208 pp. Index. \$22.50. ISBN: 1-56663-116-5.

Hitler's Secret Bankers: The Myth of Swiss Neutrality during the Holocaust.

Adam LeBor. Secaucus, N.J.: Birch Lane Press, 1997. xxiv, 261 pp. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. \$21.95. ISBN: 1-55972-421-8.

The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto.

Alan Adelson, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. xiii, 271 pp. Bibliography. Illustrations. \$27.50. ISBN: 0-19-510450-1.

The 1990s have seen a widespread resurgence of interest in the Holocaust, raising questions about individual, organizational, and national culpability, restitution for victims, and the effectiveness of attempts to describe or explain what happened. Questions about the truth of the Holocaust have arisen, and the population of living victims and other witnesses is

dwindling. This essay reviews twelve recent books about the Holocaust and raises issues of importance to archivists who work with Holocaust-related materials. It suggests ways in which the profession can best serve users who seek to expose historical fraud, promote justice for survivors, or analyze the multifaceted implications of the Holocaust.

Oneg Shabbat, an underground group in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II, kept busy during one critical phase of the Holocaust by surreptitiously collecting historical materials documenting Ghetto life and the suffering of Ghetto residents. Emmanuel Ringelblum's diary for June 1942 describes how *Oneg Shabbat* smuggled information out of the Ghetto, and how the information reached London and was broadcast over the BBC. His diary entry percolates with excitement: "I do not know," he wrote, "who of our group will survive, who . . . will work through our collected material. But one thing is clear to all of us. Our toils and tribulations, our devotion and constant terror, have not been in vain. We have struck the enemy a hard blow."¹ He seemed to feel that telling the story would result in intervention which would save the Polish Jews from ultimate destruction. However, the British government did not respond and the Polish Jews were not saved. Nevertheless, the collection, preservation, and accessibility of documents relating to the Holocaust was important then and remains important today.²

The Holocaust was the central event of World War II, which was itself the defining event of the twentieth century. Hitler himself is said to have explained that without anti-Semitism there could have been no Nazism.³ The "Final Solution," a Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews of Europe, was inaugurated in 1942 at the Wannsee Conference, but had been preceded by years of less extreme persecutions by Nazis and others. It occupies a central position in the universe of contemporary thought not only because of its scale and nearly indescribable horror, but also because of deeper, far-reaching implications. Are lies, including "Big Lies," so easy for so many to accept? How and why do facades of civilized behavior crumble, even to the extent of

¹ Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*, edited by Jacob Sloan (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974), 295–96.

² Many repositories in Europe, the United States, and Israel contain invaluable collections relevant to Holocaust research. Governmental, legal, and military records from the 1930s and 1940s are rich sources of information. Pertinent manuscripts and oral histories can be found at universities, institutes, public libraries, and museums. Notable repositories include the U.S. National Archives, the Berlin Document Center, YIVO Institute Archives in New York, the Yad Vashem Research Institute in Jerusalem, the Simon Wiesenthal Center Archives in Los Angeles, and the Jewish and Slavic Division of the New York Public Library. Yale University has major collections of oral histories. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum includes a library and archives, although the museum's focus is on educational outreach more than original scholarship.

³ See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975), 3–22; Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37, 43–47; and Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (New York: Meridian, 1989), 12–18.

considering a target group to be nonhuman and disposable? Who must bear responsibility for what acts, and who for inaction?⁴

Finally, why, aside from general historical interest and humanitarian compassion, should archivists be concerned about issues relating to the Holocaust?

Consider recent developments widely reported in the press. Individuals, groups, and the public in general are interested in the details of the Holocaust for an assortment of reasons. Some want restitution, while others want to explore broader issues like the extent of culpability. Writers have tried to penetrate veils of hypocrisy, whether private, organizational, or national. Recent stories in the media have focused on the unwillingness of Swiss banks to release money deposited before or during the Holocaust to survivors or their descendants.⁵ European insurance companies, who have for fifty years refused to honor claims resulting from Holocaust-related murders, thefts, or damage, are likewise under increasing pressure and scrutiny. "Archaeology" in old insurance records has helped some victims recover long-standing claims.⁶ In 1998 the Vatican resisted pressure to open wartime files that might prove or disprove allegations that the Vatican Bank received gold looted from Jews, Serbs, and Gypsies by Croatian Fascists.⁷ American museums have been criticized for slipshod efforts to verify ownership of paintings acquired for their collections, and pieces of art looted by the Nazis from Jewish owners have been turning up in prestigious institutions like New York's Metropolitan Museum and Chicago's Art Institute.⁸ The archivist for the International Red Cross recently opened confidential records documenting the organization's knowledge of wholesale deportations and killings of Jews and its failure to intervene or protest effectively.⁹

⁴ The Holocaust did not emerge as a legitimate topic for historical research or debate until the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, who coordinated arrangements for the "Final Solution." Thousands of books and articles have since appeared. (Harvard University, for example, owns 6,120 books cataloged under the subject heading "Holocaust, Jewish." The number is constantly growing.) Recent historical discourse about the Holocaust has touched on a multiplicity of issues and questions. Some historians have called for new categories of historical analysis, the use of unconventional techniques, or the reconsideration of the requirements of historiography. Among the most frequently and hotly debated questions are the following: Is the Holocaust capable of being historicized? Does doing so trivialize the tragedy? Was the Holocaust an inevitable outgrowth of German anti-Semitism? Would it have occurred without Hitler? Can the Nazi persecution of Jews be relativized as a defensive reaction to foreign threats, analogous to what other countries have done under similar circumstances? To what extent should ordinary Germans bear blame for complicity or for inaction? To what extent should other countries (France? The U.S.?) be held accountable? Should other targeted groups (such as Gypsies, homosexuals, Poles, or the mentally retarded) be considered equal as victims, or does doing so detract from the special character of the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe?

⁵ *New York Times*, 27 October 1997.

⁶ *Miami Herald*, 12 February 1998.

⁷ *New York Times*, 7 February 1998; see also *Boston Globe*, 9 October 1997.

⁸ *Boston Globe*, 24 July 1997.

⁹ *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 8 October 1997.

Declassification of U.S. government records is proceeding apace. The Clinton administration has issued a directive for massive review and declassification of records older than twenty-five years. In 1998 Congress passed a bill providing funds to pay for archival research in support of restitution for Holocaust victims.¹⁰

Such current events and problems have an immediate impact on our responsibilities as archivists. Other issues related to the Holocaust have less obvious, but equally important implications. The reunification of Germany, the fall of the Iron Curtain, dwindling survivor populations, fiftieth anniversaries, and the widespread appeal of Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* have increased awareness of and sparked innovative approaches in thinking about the Holocaust. The 1990s have also seen a significant increase in books about the Holocaust, including documentary publications, reference guides, monographs, memoirs, and fiction. The archival implications of a dozen of these volumes are considered in this review essay.

The background and meaning of the Holocaust denial movement have been courageously addressed by Deborah E. Lipstadt in her book *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. Political changes in Europe in the last decade or so have precipitated a number of personal, ethnic, and national identity crises, which have led some to reexamine the past, including previous conceptions about the Holocaust. Some have sought refuge in denial as a way of coping with untenable aspects of their national history. Others have channeled aggressive impulses into xenophobic and anti-Semitic patterns. Holocaust deniers are still a fringe group in North America, but their numbers and influence are growing in Europe, and they can no longer be ignored.

Some of these people choose to believe that neither Germany nor its collaborationists killed large numbers of Jews in World War II, and they offer a variety of distorted explanations for why the "myth" of the Holocaust has become so widespread. A recurrent theme is that the "myth" is a "Jewish lie" designed to ensure sympathy for Israel and that all documentary and physical evidence is falsified or easily discounted by means of alternative explanations. These "deniers" are (you choose) crackpots, bigots, or liars. But a number of the more influential among them hold tenured positions at universities. Their principal organ, *The Journal of Historical Review*, sits side by side in many institutions of learning with journals containing bona fide works of scholarship. (Arthur Butz, at Northwestern University, is the foremost American exponent of this creed. His European counterpart is Robert Faurisson.¹¹) The idea that there can be a debate about whether or not the Holo-

¹⁰ The bill was approved by the U.S. House of Representatives on 27 January 1998.

¹¹ E.g., see Arthur Butz, *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century* (Torrance, Calif.: Historical Review Press, 1975); and Robert Faurisson, *Mémoire en défense: contre ceux qui m'accusent de falsifier l'histoire: la question*

caust occurred has also crept into popular culture. Daytime television talk show hosts from time to time provide a forum for the views of Holocaust deniers.

Lipstadt's book is a comprehensive survey of denial from World War II to 1993 and also includes a brief look at prewar antecedents. These detailed descriptions of denial ideology and vehicles for its promulgation are perversely fascinating. Especially alarming is evidence that doubts about the occurrence of the Holocaust seem to have infiltrated the mainstream of American culture. Pseudoscientific attacks tend, over time, to obscure the truth. Goebbels knew the efficacy of "Big Lies," and big lying still influences opinion. According to Lipstadt, "Most people do not believe the deniers' claims, but find themselves at a loss about how to address the charges. Some, fearful that the deniers' findings have a measure of legitimacy, respond by seeking alternative explanations." She describes in detail her rationale for choosing not to debate with Holocaust deniers: presenting their views as a legitimate topic for debate is one of their immediate and most cherished goals.

In several important appendices, Lipstadt adduces a selection of documentary and technical proofs to dismiss any credibility that might be attached to three of the most common claims made by deniers: that Zyklon-B was used in Nazi camps only as a delousing agent, or, alternatively, that it was too potent to be used safely by the SS as an agent for killing prisoners; that homicidal gas chambers never existed; and that *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a fraud. (The *Diary*, though self-consciously rewritten by Anne and prudishly edited by others before its posthumous publication, is genuine.¹² The curiously relentless focus by Holocaust deniers on the adolescent reflections of a young Jewish girl can only be explained as an attempt to discredit a work used frequently and effectively by schools to introduce young readers to the reality of the Holocaust.)

Archivists may be especially interested in Lipstadt's opinions on notions of ultimate historical reality in the contemporary climate. In the 1960s a number of scholars began to argue that texts, including original documents, had no fixed meaning because meaning hinges upon an individual reader's interpretation. In such an intellectual climate it became more difficult to talk about the objective truth of an idea, or even an event. This "fostered an atmosphere in which it became harder to say that an idea was beyond the pale of rational thought . . . [B]ecause deconstructionism argued that experience was relative and nothing was fixed, it created an atmosphere of per-

des chambres a gaz (Paris: Vielle Taupe, 1980). The Harvard University Libraries have 119 titles cataloged under the subject heading "Holocaust denial."

¹² Anne Frank, *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*, edited by David Barnouw and Gerrold van der Stroom (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

missiveness toward questioning the meaning of historical events and made it hard to assert that there was anything 'off limits.' " Many students seem to have absorbed this type of thinking. "Far too many of them found it impossible to recognize Holocaust denial as a movement with no scholarly, intellectual, or rational validity. A sentiment had been generated in society—not just on campus—that made it difficult to say: 'This has nothing to do with ideas. This is bigotry.' "

The author has made a yeoman effort to analyze and refute the denial movement, but ultimately *Denying the Holocaust* may survive primarily as a record of what Holocaust denial was rather than as a tool for convincing the unconvinced that the Holocaust really happened. Rational argument, as Lipstadt knows, is not an adequate counterbalance to irrational belief. Nevertheless, she seems to have gotten under the skin of the movement's leaders. Some recent issues of *The Journal of Historical Review* have attacked her with a virulence normally reserved for Anne Frank.

The need to refute Holocaust denial has led to some highly ambitious publishing projects, such as the multivolume *Archives of the Holocaust, An International Collection of Selected Documents*, under the general editorship of Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton, consisting of twenty-six volumes of photographic reproductions of untranslated documents [see *American Archivist* 59 (Spring 1996): 248–59, for a review of this work—Ed.]. More accessible to the average reader is the fine new selection of Holocaust documents in English translation, *Witness to the Holocaust: An Illustrated Documentary History of the Holocaust in the Words of its Victims, Perpetrators, and Bystanders*, edited by Michael Berenbaum. Berenbaum was director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Research Institute and is currently president of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. The book's ninety-four documents are well organized into twenty-one sections, each representing a stage in the growth of the Holocaust or focusing on some particularly illustrative event. Starting with the declaration by Nazi leaders of a boycott against Jewish businesses (1933), it concludes with excerpts from the Nuremberg Trials (1946). The volume includes significant samples of anti-Semitic laws passed by the Third Reich, reports by German officials relating to "actions" (orchestrated violence against Jews), reminiscences of perpetrators, and other personal and official documents. The text is nicely offset by an excellent selection of telling photographs and the occasional photographic reproduction of an original document.

Of special interest are sections on "The Judenrat," "The Call to Arms," and "The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising." These groups of documents illustrate in fascinating detail the variety of adaptations made by Jews faced with limited choices in increasingly claustrophobic and threatening situations. The *Judenrat* was an institution established by the Germans to regulate ghetto activities

in accordance with Nazi directives. Those sitting on the *Judenrat* were often solid members of the Jewish community selected because of their anticipated influence over other Jews. These unfortunate men were forced regularly to make and announce wrenching decisions. Should the community cooperate by now surrendering its elderly to comply with Nazi demands? How much time would that buy? What would the next demand be? What would be the probable consequences of noncompliance? As the documents reveal, participants in armed Jewish resistance took a very different approach, typically after absorbing an unavoidable, creeping awareness that no amount of cooperation or appeasement would, in the end, save Jews from annihilation by their tormentors.

This volume would be more useful as a bulwark against the insidious growth of Holocaust denial if more documents were shown in facsimile and more information provided about the provenance and current locations of each letter, memoir, or report. A transcription is easily forged. Forging an authentic-looking contemporary document is much more difficult. Furthermore, contemporary objects, including documents, are palpable reminders of people and events. Even facsimiles of documents can speak to us in ways that a mere transcription of content cannot.

Introductory descriptions for some sections and some individual documents in the book are inconsistent in quality and depth. (We long to know, for example, what became of the infant girl abandoned by her mother in a basket with a note pleading for strangers to save the child and including detailed instructions for childcare. How was the note preserved, and where is it now?) Berenbaum's attention to editorial details may have suffered because of competing demands on his time from responsibilities at the Museum and Research Institute. Even so, *Witness to the Holocaust* is a creditable and accessible effort.

An earlier work that should be read in conjunction with Berenbaum's book is the ironically titled "*The Good Old Days*": *The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, edited by Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess. The title is taken from the name given by Treblinka concentration camp commandant Kurt Franz to his scrapbook of annotated photos depicting the murder of Jews. (Photographing such atrocities was forbidden by the Nazis, but some killers and onlookers could not resist.) The volume edited by Klee et al. consists of a selection of translated letters, diaries, and reports, accompanied by equally chilling pictures documenting horrors perpetrated against Jews during the Holocaust. All materials in the book are in the collections of the Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen, a repository maintained for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes, Ludwigsburg, Germany. From the revealing documents and commentaries we learn that German "tourists" sometimes attended mass executions of Jews, that German

soldiers took home souvenir photos of mass graves, and that perpetrators wrote home to wives and girlfriends, reviewing the events of a full day of killing, complaining that the work was a strain on the nerves, but well worth it. Photographs in the book are a remarkable vehicle for gaining some insight into perpetrator psychology not ordinarily found elsewhere. In studying the faces, the grinning, the posture, one can sense that some of the photographed killers apparently enjoyed what they were doing, and some bystanders apparently enjoyed watching. (Note, however, that interpretation of photographs for psychological insight is difficult, controversial, and problematic. Such reading of photos can be easily abused, as in Michael Lesy's overly prolific oeuvre.)

The Nazi camp experience has been recorded with varying degrees of success by hundreds of survivors. A few of these memoirs rank among the literary treasures of the twentieth century. Other survivors seem unable to put the experience meaningfully into words, feeling an irresistible urge to speak, but finding it impossible to communicate across an unbridgeable chasm to readers who did not endure the Holocaust and cannot, therefore, find sufficient reference points to understand it.

Historians generally have added little to our understanding of the experience of victims of the Holocaust. Some have turned recently to new techniques and cross-disciplinary approaches in an attempt to convey meaning across this abyss of experience. Do the insights of literature, psychology, film, or other areas of study and creativity bring us closer to an understanding?

An eclectic group of scholars convened in San Diego in 1990 to discuss these questions. A selection of the papers presented has been edited by Saul Friedlander and published as *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution."* The conference raised a host of questions about the cluster of events, feelings, actions, and inactions we call the Holocaust. Can it be understood? If so, in what ways can its meaning be conveyed to others? What issues and dilemmas arise in attempts at artistic representation? Can mountains of testimony and other documentation establish an objective record, or is objectivity unattainable because of predetermined narrative choices? If we can describe the Holocaust, why can't we explain it? The nineteen essays in this volume bring the methods of poetry, art, law, literary criticism, philosophy, psychiatry, cinema, historiography, and epistemology to bear on these problems. As might be expected, some of the efforts are more successful than others. In the aggregate, the essays offer up more doubts than answers. They do, however, point the way to new directions for documentation and new voices for description. Hayden White, for example, calls for a new voice for telling about the Holocaust in "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," one that falls between the objective voice of history and the subjective one of fiction and poetry. He argues that the historian must attempt to en-

counter and experience the events instead of merely describing and analyzing them.

Archivists who administer oral history collections or supervise oral history projects relating to the Holocaust will be especially interested in Geoffrey Hartmann's contribution, "The Book of the Destruction," which raises questions about the reliability of narratives taken from Holocaust survivors. While we, as archivists, are not required to evaluate the shades and degrees of truth in recorded narrative (that task falls to the vigilance and expertise of the historian), the more sophisticated our understanding of memory and its documentary residue, the better our administration of oral history projects will be. Such insights are helpful in planning strategies, preparing background, and formulating and implementing interviews. Of similar interest is Christopher Browning's essay, "German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, and Historical Reconstruction: Writing Perpetrator History from Postwar Testimony," which discusses problems of memory and comparisons of conflicting accounts (termed the "the Roshomon effect") in attempts to define facts regarding the activities of Reserve Police Battalion 101 during the war.

In many ways, Lawrence Langer has followed through on the spirit of the San Diego conference by editing a new Holocaust anthology titled *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*. Langer, a professor of English literature at Simmons College, has selected an ample and unforgettable assortment of Holocaust narratives, including fiction, memoirs, and philosophical reflections. To the prose selections he has added smaller and less memorable sections of poetry and art. The book is divided into five general categories: "The Way It Was" (nonfiction), "Fiction," "Drama," "Poetry," and "Painters of Terezin." It will undoubtedly be assigned for classes in Holocaust studies, but only the bravest students will get through every selection, for much of the content in this volume is truly unsettling.

A theme shared by much of the fiction and nonfiction is that, for people entrapped in the world of the Holocaust, there were no predictable patterns or rules. Men and women stopped seeing themselves as being in control of their destinies. Tormented by oppression, reduced by fear and helplessness, most adopted a victim's mentality.

Jankiel Wiernik escaped from the Nazi death camp at Treblinka in August 1942. His contemporary account of life at the camp, with its depredations, humiliations, tortures, and fears, is included in "The Way It Was." In the same section Primo Levi, who lived to tell about Auschwitz, discusses shame, a common psychological phenomenon among survivors. Jean Amery describes his torture under interrogation in Nazi-occupied Belgium, analyzing the experience in excruciating detail. Fictional accounts, many of which might be more accurately viewed as autobiographical observations transformed by the tools of fiction writing, include Tadeusz Borowski's dark "This

Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen,” about the numbness of prisoners who unload boxcars of new arrivals at a camp, confiscating and sorting their possessions for the Germans. Isaiah Spiegel’s story “Bread” describes the stages by which a ravenous man comes to steal bread rations from his starving children.

Langer is correct in believing that Holocaust fiction and nonfiction complement one another. Each writer (informant) must seek a medium in which he or she can work, that allows him or her to transmit, either directly or obliquely, the essence or near-essence of the matter, the outline, metaphor, truth, or truth fragment as closely as possible. Memory recoils, and comprehension shies away from that which is too horrible to meet head-on.

The editor was less fortunate in his choice of poetry for the anthology. Even in translation, these poems are good, but they are disappointing in their capacity for bringing us closer to a deep understanding of the events they describe. The success of any poem is predicated upon the “qualifications” of the person who reads it (what she knows, what he can feel, etc.). There can be no doubt that poems about the Holocaust experience will resonate more intensely for readers who have also been through the Holocaust. Abraham Sutzkever’s nine poems in the anthology will perhaps be the most accessible for most readers. In the poem “How?” his lines on memory, with its compression of individual days and coterminous expansion of a seemingly eternal horror are vivid and evocative:

... The dark scream of your past
Where skulls of days congeal
In a bottomless pit?

Or witness his reflections on despair and paralysis in “Frozen Jews”:

The fist of a naked old man in surprise:
He cannot release his force from the ice . . .
My motions freeze . . .

The opening of Paul Celan’s poem “With a Variable Key” alludes to difficulties in communicating the Holocaust experience:

... [Y]ou unlock the house in which
drifts the snow of that left unspoken.

For archivists, the stories behind the creation, concealment, and subsequent rescue of art (reproduced in Section 5) will be at least as interesting as the works themselves. Terezin served a number of purposes for the Nazis: it was a transit camp for those whose ultimate destiny was the death camp at Auschwitz; it was a labor camp specializing in workshops set up to furnish the Third Reich with goods; and it was a “show camp,” prettified from time to

time for visits by international inspectors from the Red Cross. Artists were put to work at their trade in Terezin, making blueprints, painting pictures according to specification for sale elsewhere, and drawing pictures of construction projects (which often had to include Jewish slave laborers, made to look acceptably healthy). It is not surprising that some artists at Terezin secretly created and hid pictures expressing their own vision, as opposed to the Nazi version, of camp life. It is also predictable that a common theme of art so created would be the tension between illusion and truth. Many of the artists who made unauthorized pictures were caught, charged with disseminating "horror propaganda," and deported to their deaths at Auschwitz. Artist Leo Hass survived the war to return to Terezin and recover his own works as well as those of others.

The pictures document despair, crowding, hunger, queues, and fantasies doomed never to be fulfilled. Expressionless Jews sit in a coffeehouse surrounded by barbed wire. The sick and the dying sprawl on makeshift beds in an unused cinema. The scenes convey little of physical horrors, uncontrollable fears, or torture. Curiously, many other examples of German expressionist art from the 1930s and 1940s seem more violent, shocking, and disturbing than the creative outpouring of the Terezin painters. Terezin victim Karel Fleischmann's style in some way resembles that of Max Beckmann, but where Beckmann presents us with severed limbs and trussed victims, Fleischmann shows anxious faces in a queue. (Fleischmann spent two-and-one-half years at Terezin and died at Auschwitz. Beckmann spent no time in Nazi camps, although his generalized indictments of cruelty and oppression were a reaction to the Nazi regime.) Similarly, Kathe Kollwitz's depictions of despair are just as moving and memorable as those of Terezin victim Fritz Taussig. Artists in the thirties and forties suffered generally, as today, from angst; and one can think of other examples of paintings in which anguish or boredom reflect more the artist's reaction to the anomie of capitalism than to the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust.

Langer's introductory essays for each section and for individual pieces are full of insight and are indispensable for understanding the contexts. A shortcoming of his editorial judgment, however, was his decision to exclude all Holocaust writing characterized by optimism. "It would be possible," he writes, "to assemble a body of literature that mistakes survival for renewal and celebrates the triumph of human continuity over the disruptive forces of the Holocaust. But that is . . . far from my purpose." If an upsurge of hopefulness was the response of some victims, why should their presumably genuine feelings be censored from an anthology? To do so is to trivialize the feeling and demean the victim even further.

If purchasing this volume, make sure that your copy has the important errata slip containing the final paragraph of Jakov Lund's story "Resurrec-

tion.” Once again, Oxford University Press has given us an important and interesting book, sloppily proofread and printed.

Documents relating to the Holocaust have proved indispensable, even years after the event, in establishing the culpability of concentration camp guards, collaborationist officials, and other criminals. In 1982 the United States tried Kazys Palciauskas, accused of having entered the country after World War II on a false declaration. He had been appointed mayor of Kovno by the German occupation force in Lithuania in 1941, cooperated in the mass murder of tens of thousands of Jews, and lied about his wartime activities to U.S. agents. Palciauskas attempted to lie at his trial, claiming that he never had been mayor. This subterfuge was exposed by the Kovno Ghetto Diary of Avraham Tory, presented to the court in its original form, handwritten in Yiddish by Tory, who had been a Ghetto inmate for several years during the war. Tory carried the manuscript from Israel to the Florida trial after its authentication by four witnesses who had signed declarations in conformity with Israeli law. Witnesses included a Ghetto resident who had seen Tory write in the diary and another who had built the crates in which the document had been concealed beneath the foundation of a shop. Two years after the Florida proceedings, Tory escorted the diary to Toronto for the trial of Helmut Rauca, a Gestapo official who had participated in the murder of ten thousand Jews during the “Great Action” of October 1941 in Kovno. The Canadian court accepted relevant passages in the diary as proof of Rauca’s guilt. (He was extradited to Frankfurt, where he died in a prison hospital after being charged with the murder of 11,500 people.)

Tory’s diary is now available in English translation as *Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary*, edited by Martin Gilbert. It is a fascinating, precise, and remarkably dispassionate witness to what happened to the Jews of Kovno between midnight on the day of the German invasion of Lithuania on June 22, 1941, and January 9, 1944. Tory buried his manuscript in five waterproof crates in January 1944, in anticipation of his escape from the Ghetto. Only three crates were ever recovered, but these remnants constitute one of the most complete records we have of conditions in a major European ghetto during the Holocaust. (Other substantial diaries have survived from the ghettos at Warsaw, Bialystok, and Lodz.) Tory was secretary of the Jewish Council and therefore in a unique position to see documents, hear conversations, and gather impressions. He recorded his diary entries as soon as he could after observing the events he describes, and, whenever possible, saved copies of orders, proclamations, and other papers issued by the Germans, as well as Jewish Council reports. These documents were not originally part of the diary, but editor Martin Gilbert has inserted them in their correct chronological position as a supplement to the main text.

Individual passages in the diary are invaluable as a record of who did what and as a picture of the social conditions and reactions of inmates to developments from one day to the next. Recurring themes bring us closer to an understanding of how Jews saw their way through seemingly insupportable tribulations. For many, survival strategy seems to have entailed large doses of self-delusion. Passages in the diary record the gist of many conversations reflecting an ongoing debate about whether the labor performed by Jews at Nazi insistence would save them from annihilation, or merely postpone it. The question of how to balance German demands with the survival of the maximum number of Jews preoccupied the Jewish Council and appears repeatedly in Tory's entries.

Perspectives on the mentality of the perpetrators also emerge. Small details can sometimes reveal more than bigger events. The description of the roundup and murder of nearly half the Ghetto residents on the night of October 28, 1941, affords one type of insight. Additional perspectives can be charted from the order of July 24, 1942, forbidding pregnancy in the Ghetto and providing that all pregnant women must be put to death. And what do we learn from the order of January 14, 1942, that all dogs and cats in the Ghetto must be brought to the synagogue on Veliunos Street? The animals were shot inside; no one was allowed to remove the decaying bodies for months.

The Kovno Ghetto diary is obviously a rich historical resource. Its extra importance as a legal document should alert archivists to the need for careful stewardship of similar materials, including assiduous protection of provenance records. As Hilary Jenkinson noted in 1944, "The fact and nature of custody are all-important for the Archive: first, as affecting its authenticity and impartiality, and second, as affecting . . . interpretation . . . of the evidence it offers."¹³

Unauthenticated, and arguably less authentic, survivor accounts will be found in abundance in a highly readable new book by Martin Gilbert, *The Boys: The Untold Story of 732 Young Concentration Camp Survivors*. "The Boys" were a group of Jewish teenagers (including a few girls) who were brought to Great Britain after World War II under the auspices of the Central British Fund, a Jewish organization active in helping refugees. Most of "The Boys" had been exploited as slave laborers by the Nazis through much of the war and subjected to the nearly fatal rigors of death marches during the final winter months as guards herded them around the countryside to prevent their capture by advancing allied troops. After their arrival and settlement in the U.K., many members of the group remained in close contact, formed a society, held annual meetings, and published a newsletter in which some

¹³ Hilary Jenkinson, "Reflections of an Archivist," in *A Modern Archives Reader*, edited by Maygene Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Records Service, 1984), 18.

individuals recounted their wartime experiences. Historian Martin Gilbert has had a long-standing relationship with the group, has attended their meetings, and, in preparation for *The Boys*, solicited written accounts of Holocaust experiences. He received many responses, including some from participants who needed to overcome strong initial reluctance to recollect their experiences and record them on paper. His technique in constructing the book has been to let the survivors speak for themselves whenever possible, stringing long quotes together with interstices of introduction, explanation, and commentary. The stories told by survivors limn an unforgettable picture of misfortune, pain, rescue, recovery, and adaptation with varying degrees of success. The book is well organized in a scheme that is roughly chronological, starting with prewar experiences and leading the reader through deportations, camp life, death marches, rescues, resettlement in British hostels, and subsequent periods of postwar adjustment.

Gilbert's method of building a narrative is, unfortunately, replete with dangers that a cautious historian trained to weigh and evaluate evidence might have done better to avoid. His narrators recalled extremely traumatic experiences that ripped their lives apart fifty years earlier. They had been in mutual contact for decades and had repeatedly read newsletter accounts of experiences by cohorts. The resulting book is important as a proof of human resilience and ability to adapt, but less reliable as an accurate history of the details of the Holocaust. The horrible experiences recalled in *The Boys* don't seem as horrifying as those found in contemporary diaries, suggesting that memory may be filtering out indigestible details. Almost all the narrators summarize weeks or years of suffering in a few words. Some recount, in detail, a single, brief act of kindness: a German who helped them, or a Polish cook who gave a carrot. The proportion of kindness to cruelty is skewed. Some memories about rapid adaptation (e.g., their dominating English boys at soccer soon after arrival in the U.K.) seem exaggerated.

The Boys is good and even inspiring reading. The shortcomings of testimonies collected fifty years after the fact are obvious, but archivists should nevertheless continue to collect and encourage the collection of such survivor accounts.

Two new works about the Holocaust are likely to become essential tools for the reference shelf at repositories having Holocaust materials or supervising Holocaust oral history programs. (The number of such programs is burgeoning in the 1990s at universities and foundations across North America. Well-established programs at Yale and elsewhere are now being joined by initiatives in unexpected quarters, e.g., Boston's Northeastern University.) The first of these books is an atlas, the second a dictionary.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's *Historical Atlas of the Holocaust* is a good visual guide to major installations, geographic situations, transpor-

tation links, and mass movements of people (e.g., death marches, refugee routes, military operations, and links between camps). Coverage is thorough, and informative commentaries set the context and explain the principal points of interest for each map. Maps are color-coded and the codes and symbols are explained by useful keys on the same page. Considerable research in old and new sources as well as careful comparisons and use of extrinsic evidence (photographs, survivor testimony, etc.) have gone into preparation of the volume. Sources include maps issued around the time of the war by the U.S. Army, the German Wehrmacht, the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and the U.S. State Department Division of Map Intelligence, as well as local town and district maps of Germany and Poland. The editors' use of overlapping sources is well illustrated by the reconstruction of streets and terrain around the Babi Yar ravine near Kiev, the scene of mass murders and burials of Jews in the first days of the German occupation of the Ukraine in 1941.

The events of the Holocaust developed in stages, and its geography spanned many countries and regions from France to the U.S.S.R., from the Balkans to Norway. Confinements, relocations, and shifts in national borders were all crucial elements in the machinery of annihilation. The *Atlas* is divided into sections, some geographical, others related to major phases of destruction or movements of people. Section 1 comprises sixteen maps and associated commentaries illustrating "Europe before the War;" Section 3 depicts "Nazi Extermination Camps;" Section 7, "Rescue and Jewish Armed Resistance;" Section 8, "Death Marches and Liberation;" and so on. There is also a useful gazetteer and index explaining variant place names resulting from shifts in national boundaries before, during, and after the war. Principal camps (and there were many, serving a variety of sometimes overlapping functions) are mapped in detail, indicating barracks, administrative offices, crematoria, rail terminals, guard towers, barbed wire, and other features. Principal ghettos (into which Jews were herded as a means of ensuring more effective control) are also shown in their urban contexts. The book includes maps showing prewar emigration patterns, postwar resettlement, the relationship of camps to political administrative units, and other significant matters.

One disappointing feature is the lack of detail in the maps of ghettos. Ghetto diaries are among our richest extant resources for studying the hopes, fears, delusions, and modes of adjustment to the conditions of crowding, deprivation, and uncertainty associated with the Holocaust. Details such as street names and places of assembly would aid the interpretation of many events described and allusions made in such diaries. Another shortcoming of the *Atlas* is the absence of scale in camp maps. Buildings are depicted in their proper relationship but not their correct size. One gets no sense of the overall length and width of the camps. How far was the rail terminal from the gas

chambers or smoke stacks? What was the distance between the women's enclosure and the men's? A key such as "three inches equals one mile" would have been easy to provide, and is a serious omission. Each camp was the universe for its prisoners. Spatial relationships must be understood if one is to reconstruct a sense of what life was like in the relocation camps, concentration camps, work camps, and death camps.

The excellent *History of the Holocaust: A Handbook and Dictionary*, by Abraham and Hershel Edelheit is also a welcome addition to the archivist's reference shelf. The first part of the book is a good general history of the Holocaust summarizing previously published material on geography, Jewish responses to persecution, international responses, and aftermath and recovery. Part II is a "dictionary," defining terms and providing lists and encyclopaedia articles for more complex topics.

The Nazis altered the German language significantly during their thirteen years in power, sapping its vocabulary of specificity, and perverting its meanings. Many documents from the era cannot be clearly understood without a guide to these linguistic perversions. There were, for example, at least nineteen terms used as a substitute for "murder," ranging from "*Aufgelöst*" to "*Vernichtung*." Other words like "*Aktionen*" (action) became deliberately broad in an attempt to sanitize reality and can only be understood in context. Official German records as well as German diaries and memoirs are replete with these vague or indirect terms, demanding that we dig below the surface. Official records created by Jewish Councils under the Nazi heel are also indirect. Scholars working with such documents know that in correspondence neither Jews nor Nazis wrote what they really meant. In this volume we are given much-needed shovels, brushes, and sieves to help with the necessary linguistic archaeology.

Like their Nazi persecutors, Jews caught in the pincers of the Holocaust needed a transformed language to orient themselves to such new experiences as closed ghettos, slave labor, and impending doom. They invented a vocabulary of encoded terms as fascinating as they are macabre. A "*klapsedra*" (a black-edged death announcement) was an emaciated prisoner expected to die soon. "*Di kvoreslait fun Treblinka*" (gravediggers of Treblinka) were those whose task it was to exhume bodies and burn the evidence of mass murder to prevent discovery by advancing allied armies. "*Kriyas yam suf*" (the parting of the Red Sea) was a Jewish code word for the allied invasion at Normandy.

The *Dictionary*, like the *Atlas*, should prove to be a useful guide to interpretation of reports, correspondence, diaries, memoirs, and oral histories. They might also be valuable as mnemonic devices for informants participating in oral history programs, or as preparation for oral historians getting background for an interview.

There is truth in the old joke about German World War II records. According to the story, we know as much as we do about the details of the

Third Reich's structure and operations only because German archivists, like archivists everywhere, recoiled at the thought of destroying records they had so carefully maintained, despite urgent directives from higher command, even as Russian and American armies closed in. A new book of autobiographical reflections by Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian*, talks about the uses made of captured records and the emergence of historical interest in the Holocaust.

There was very little writing or discussion about the Holocaust before the Israeli trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Historical works about World War II typically mentioned the murder of Jews as one of many atrocities committed by the Nazis in an unusually brutal war. When, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Hilberg embarked on the adventure of writing a Ph.D. dissertation on the annihilation of Jews, his advisor at Columbia told him, "It's your funeral." He knew that he was isolating himself from the "mainstream of academic research to tread in territory that had been avoided by the academic world and the public alike." To support his research, he took a job with the newly established War Documentation Project in a torpedo tube factory converted for use as a federal records center near the waterfront in Alexandria, Virginia. The U.S. government had collected captured German records of the Nazi era and reassembled them in the factory, where they filled 28,000 linear feet of shelving. Each document was housed in its original German folder. The collections included a huge volume of military materials regarding procurement, forced labor, occupied territories, and other matters.

Hilberg worked in the records center as part of a team whose exact mission was ill-defined, but involved finding out what the Germans had discovered about the U.S.S.R. during World War II, including the location of targets and Soviet strengths and weaknesses. He describes his excitement at being surrounded by records labeled "confidential" or "secret" because no one in the government knew what information they contained. Whatever work he performed for the government, he realized, would also benefit him in his personal research. Working with the records enabled him to disentangle jurisdictions in ways he would need to understand. Learning about German occupations of foreign countries would allow him to grasp the settings and conditions for the destruction of Jews.

At some point, Hilberg was awakened to more general insights about the nature of records. His comments offer unusually direct insight for archivists into how and what historians can learn from collections, and how they think about documents. "I had just begun to realize what a document really is," he recalls, "first of all an artifact, immediately recognizable as a relic. It is the original paper . . . that was handled by a bureaucrat and signed or initialed by him. More than that, the words on the paper constituted an action: the performance of a function."

One thing he found was that nothing in the huge volume of files seemed too remote for his purposes. The vastness of the records echoed the vast structure of the Nazi regime. The mundane nature of the documentation revealed that the machinery of decimation was itself mundane. The destruction of Jews was so decentralized that it required the participation of “all those agencies that had the means to perform their share of the action at the moment when the need for their contribution arose. The spectrum of offices that were ultimately involved . . . is synonymous with the concept of German government or the whole of Germany’s organized society.” He also found that the bureaucracy generated its own momentum, promoting increased efficiency in annihilation, perhaps because of diffusion of responsibility.

Other sections of Hilberg’s memoirs are also interesting, especially those concerning his attempts to trace the provenance of an important Warsaw Ghetto diary and his trip to the Library of Congress to search through Hannah Arendt’s papers for evidence of what she really thought about him. One would prefer, however, to see more in this memoir about archival resources and the historian’s epiphanies in contemplation of them and less about academic squabbling. Readers craving additional information about the nature of the sources used by Hilberg in his groundbreaking study must look to his magisterial three volume *The Destruction of the European Jews*.

Long-standing allegations that Switzerland’s fabled World War II neutrality was a myth and that Swiss bankers helped finance important activities of the Third Reich rose to higher levels of scrutiny in 1997 upon the release of an eleven-agency U.S. government report detailing allied efforts to recover gold and other assets stolen by Nazis and deposited in Switzerland before and during the war. The report was part of an ongoing study of 800,000 pages of recently declassified documents expected to reveal what the U.S. knew about Nazi finances. It criticizes the U.S. for its failure to force Switzerland to divulge a full account of its Nazi dealings. The report, however, directed by Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstadt and State Department Historian William Slaney, reserves its harshest condemnation for the Swiss. Swiss banks accepted looted gold from the Nazis and facilitated Nazi purchases by providing them with Swiss francs. (Most countries would not accept reichsmarks during the war). In addition, Swiss manufacturers sold the Nazis indispensable war materials, including weapons, ammunition, locomotives, and aluminum. The report concluded that Switzerland’s business-as-usual policy may have prolonged the war.

The background to these and other allegations is told in interesting detail in Adam LeBor’s book *Hitler’s Secret Bankers: The Myth of Swiss Neutrality During the Holocaust*. LeBor, a correspondent for the London *Times* and the *Jewish Chronicle*, has reconstructed portions of a complex international story

through interviews and research in recently declassified records at the U.S. National Archives and elsewhere. The stories that emerge are iconoclastic and intriguing, filling lacunae left by press releases and newspaper articles. It now seems apparent that Swiss bankers not only accepted looted gold, but also “washed” loot by transfers to Spain and Portugal. Other details about economic and political accommodation and complicity are equally damning. Stolen art and other chattels found safe storage in the vaults of Swiss banks. Banks made minimal efforts, if any, over the course of fifty years to honor the claims of the heirs of depositors who had died in the Holocaust. The Swiss government cooperated with the Germans in rejecting Jews who sought asylum in Switzerland and even arranged for the Third Reich to add the letter “J” (for “Juden”) to the passports of German and Austrian Jews to make them easier to identify at the border. (However, many of the policies of Nazi appeasement promoted by the Swiss Federal Council and banks did not seem to have overall support from the Swiss populace or press.)

LeBor believes that unsavory facts about the Swiss past are emerging now, after fifty years or more, for three reasons: the end of the Cold War and the fiftieth anniversary of the allied victory in World War II; the American commitment to release documents; and the marriage of convenience between the World Jewish Congress and New York’s Senator Alphonse D’Amato, chairman of the Senate Banking Committee. Much of the current research is being done in the records of Operation Safehaven, a U.S. State Department and Treasury Department operation that attempted to monitor the movement of Nazi assets into Switzerland around the time of the war.

LeBor’s assessment of the value of his book and of current, ongoing research in archival documents will be of special interest to archivists. He believes that current work should be considered a starting point upon which others must build. Many of the current users of the newly available documents have a vested interest, an intense personal involvement in the research process. The “whole historical truth” will emerge gradually, if at all. His comments underline what we, as archivists, already know. Each succeeding generation of users will view a collection differently, coming to it with different motives, increased hindsight, and different tools for interpretation. These future users will sift, appraise, and digest the information we preserve, each according to his or her needs, acculturation, and understanding.

Much of the more interesting Holocaust documentation has survived by accident or good fortune. The extant notebooks recently published as *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto*, edited by Alan Adelson, were found on top of a stove, others having apparently been burned for heat. Other testimonies, diaries, and drawings were at various times, in various places painstakingly squirreled away in buried crates, milk cans, or tar paper in efforts to establish the truth, to ensure that a record was passed

on, to contradict Nazi lies. *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak* is a haunting, unfiltered account of an adolescent radical's declining health and evaporating ideals under ghetto conditions. The diary traces his regression into despair, not only because of hunger and disease, but also as his sensitive awareness grapples with the unbelievable, searching for meaning where perhaps there was none.

Survivors warn that the Holocaust was "like another planet," where there were no guides for action, and no prior experiences upon which to construct understanding or build a plan. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi described his orientation, by incomprehensible but necessary adjustments, to what his life as a Nazi victim would be. After a tortuous journey by boxcar with no water, his group of new arrivals at the camp was tattooed and herded into a room to await further processing. Driven by thirst, he opened a window and broke off an icicle that was suspended from the eave. A German guard knocked the icicle out of his hand. "Why?" Levi asked. "There is no why here," the guard replied.¹⁴ Levi spent much of his life after Auschwitz attempting to explain the Holocaust, to himself and to others.

There are many reasons why archivists should be interested in the documentation of the Holocaust. Comprehensive collection and stewardship of documents is needed to preserve as complete a record as possible of the growth of decisions, actions, and bureaucracies that promoted and facilitated the Holocaust. Such resources can stand as a perpetual contradiction to "Big Lies." Records can be preserved and opened up that may help victims and their heirs secure restitution. Archivists are in a position to encourage collection of new testimonies from a waning population of survivors and other witnesses.

Our documentation should be inclusive. Key issues are often hidden, or multifaceted. Alternative sources like literature and psychiatry can fill gaps in understanding. The Holocaust is best understood in conjunction with other aspects of the Nazi regime, e.g., the interactions between local politics and the rhythms of ghettoization, or the Nazi perception that the U.S.S.R. would soon be open for settlement and provide vast resources of labor, making Jewish slaves unnecessary, opening the door to the "Final Solution."

Describing and comprehending a culture as alien as that engendered by the Holocaust is like trying to pin down a fixed point of reference in a shifting moral, physical, and psychological palimpsest. Is this the point? Or is that? What details can be told that will complete this fact, that will make the world understand? Primo Levi noted in a story published not long before his suicide, that "this theme is desperate, the means feeble . . . the trade of clothing facts in words is bound by its very nature to fail."¹⁵

¹⁴ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 24–25.

¹⁵ Primo Levi, "Carbon," in *The Periodic Table* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 232–33.

Some questions may never be answered. Some answers may never be adequate. But pursuit of truth, by its nature, recruits the service of active minds and honest inquiry, a challenge that archivists should not decline.