

# Survivor Testimonies and the Problem of Time

▼ **SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE** in *Entangled Temporalities*

▼ **ABSTRACT** Testimonies of Holocaust survivors have had an essential influence on public engagement with the Shoah in recent decades. Given this importance, the imminent end of the “era of the witness” has sparked fears that the history of the Holocaust could soon be forgotten. The past decades have therefore seen unprecedented efforts to record the testimonies of Holocaust survivors in order to safeguard the immediacy of their accounts. In this essay, I trace how different temporal entanglements have affected the narrated memory of Holocaust survivors and thus also shaped the knowledge of those born later. Focusing on four interviews conducted with a Jewish Holocaust survivor in 1946, 1995, 1998, and 2004 respectively, I explore how biological time, historical time, recording time, and the temporality of narrative have shaped the narrated memories. As I argue, the different temporal entanglements have allowed for starkly different reconfigurations and reconstructions of the past. This renders the study of the epistemic constitutive nature of entangled temporalities important not only for Holocaust studies, but also for the history of knowledge, a field which has recently turned to processes of forgetting and ignorance.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Holocaust Testimonies; History of Forgetting; History of Ignorance; Time Studies; Oral History

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In January 2022, I learnt of the death of Holocaust survivor Trude Simonsohn at age 100. The name seemed familiar. A photo of her was printed above one of the obituaries. I was sure I had seen her before. Still pondering where exactly, I suddenly remembered the visit of a Holocaust survivor to my high school near Frankfurt. I must have been about eleven years old, and the lecture must have taken place in 1999 or 2000. Trude Simonsohn would have been in her late 70s at that time, which coincides with my memory of an older but still very agile woman.

The obituaries I read in the days that followed Trude Simonsohn's death spoke of her remarkable courage and optimism. The obituary by the Jewish community of Frankfurt quoted a passage from her memoirs: "Why did I survive? When I look back on my life, I had many chances to be dead. I was lucky, in spite of everything. A luck composed of many, many small pieces of the mosaic."<sup>1</sup> This attitude, too, sounded familiar. I remember darkly a sense of wonder I felt then, at age eleven. We expected to hear only terrible things, things that matched the gruesome images and stories we all knew, and instead there was a woman who described herself as "lucky."

A few weeks before Trude Simonsohn's death, I had stumbled upon something in a newspaper that I had made a note of: "When a very old person dies, so does an age that, although long gone, hibernated in her."<sup>2</sup> The phrase captures well the feeling that has troubled contemporaries since at least the 1990s. Holocaust survivors had managed to keep the past "alive" or "hot" through the historical immediacy and plasticity of their narratives—or so the reasoning went. But now these survivors were beginning to pass away at increasing rates, their deaths stirring fears that the barbarous history might soon be forgotten. "Future generations will not hear the story from people who can say 'this is what happened to me'," explained Deborah Lipstadt in 1994. "For them it will be part of the distant past and, consequently, more susceptible to revision and denial."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Tony Judt prophesied in 2005, "Within a generation the memorials and museums will be gathering dust—visited, like the battlefields of the Western Front today, only by aficionados and relatives."<sup>4</sup> Given the barbaric past, this was a horror scenario that had to be prevented at all costs.

Paradoxically, the apparently imminent end of the "Era of the Witness" also established its beginning.<sup>5</sup> Since the late 1970s, thousands and thousands of interviews have been conducted and recorded with survivors of the Holocaust to make their voices audible even after their passing. Among the best-known

1 Simonsohn and Abendroth, *Noch ein Glück*, 149.

2 „Es stirbt, wenn ein sehr alter Mensch stirbt, auch ein Zeitalter, das, obwohl es lange vorbei ist, in ihm überwinterte.“ Radisch, Raether, and Weidemann, "Der Saltospringer."

3 Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, xiii.

4 Judt, *Postwar*, 830.

5 Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*; on this point, see Taubitz, *Holocaust Oral History*, 10; on the rise of the witness as key figure in public debates and remembering, see Sabrow, "Der Zeitzeuge."

archives and institutions established specifically for this purpose are the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the Fortunoff Video Archive in New Haven, and the Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation in Los Angeles founded by Steven Spielberg. In recent years, there have also been attempts to capture the images of eyewitnesses using hologram technology. With the help of the latest speech recognition and generation software, they aim at conveying the immediacy of a conversation to future generations. These attempts are motivated by the desire “to stop the end of eyewitnesses for all time and to preserve the memory of the Holocaust—as it exists today.”<sup>6</sup> They are attempts to counter the passage of time.

And yet, these attempts are not freezing the past itself, and not even a “stable” memory of the past, as is often suggested.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they capture temporary re-envisionings of the past as they presented themselves in various past presents. These past presents, however, differ fundamentally—and with them, the testimonies that have been recorded. Oral history scholars have long pointed to the decisive influence of the context in which the telling takes place on interviewees’ recounting of events. They have emphasized the importance of the social context of an interview, the changing “collective memory,” and the specific mediality of the interview.<sup>8</sup> The significance of these influences on Holocaust testimonies was demonstrated by Sharon Kangisser Cohen’s and Daniel Schuch’s studies on the longitudinal development of survivor testimonies.<sup>9</sup> While Schuch emphasizes the importance of the expectations of the public and the respective interviewers, Kangisser Cohen points to the decisive effects of “the evolving cultural interpretations of the Holocaust, the image and role of the survivor in society, and the established tropes and narratives through which experience is communicated.”<sup>10</sup>

In several cases, more than sixty years lie between the interviews that Kangisser Cohen and Schuch analyze. While in one interview we encounter a young person, almost still a child, in the other we see an old person. The hair has turned gray, the voice has changed, and in most cases, the language as well. And yet, the factor of time has so far remained largely unconsidered.<sup>11</sup> While oral history scholars have highlighted the “mutability” and “the unfinished nature” of oral history interviews, they have largely focused on the effects of different facets of intersubjectivity.<sup>12</sup>

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6 Taubitz, *Holocaust Oral History*, 14.

7 See, e.g., *ibid.*, 33.

8 See, e.g., Portelli, *The Order*; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*; Nägel, “Zeugnis – Artefakt – Digitalisat.”

9 Kangisser Cohen, *Testimony and Time*; Schuch, *Transformationen der Zeugenschaft*; for psychological studies of these changes, see Wagenaar and Groeneweg, “The Memory”; Henry Greenspan, *The Awakening of Memory*; Schiff, “Telling It in Time.”

10 Kangisser Cohen, *Testimony and Time*, 17.

11 Kangisser Cohen points to the role that survivors’ age at the time of retelling and the possible transition of the self might play. Her analysis, however, focusses on “the role of the interviewer in the co-construction of testimony,” *ibid.*, 17, 214.

12 Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 24; Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” 56.

Historians estimate that more than 80,000 interviews have now been recorded in the U.S. alone, filling hundreds of thousands of audio or video tapes.<sup>13</sup> These attempts, dubbed by one observer as a “form of rescue archaeology,” are as impressive as they are important.<sup>14</sup> However, they come with a caveat. The “Era of the Witness” which saw a new interest in the recording, collection, and reception of survivor testimonies, began only in the late 1970s.<sup>15</sup> Earlier accounts by Holocaust survivors tended to be overlooked and have been, to this day, largely forgotten.<sup>16</sup> The reasons for this are manifold, with the ease of access due to digitization and the fact that later testimonies were recorded in English as video interviews among the most prominent.

Historians of knowledge have recently begun to tackle processes of forgetting and ignorance. As they have pointed out, just like the process of circulation, processes of forgetting and ignorance are reproduced socially, too, and are just as much in need of explanation.<sup>17</sup> This essay takes inspiration from these studies. The history of testimony collection is embedded in “anxieties of loss and promises of permanence” (see also Milam, Gurevitch, and Mukharji, this issue), and yet observers rarely seek to clarify what was lost and forgotten during the decades of ignorance before the late 1970s. Driven by the wish to reconstruct what has fallen into oblivion, I explore how time and temporality have affected the narrated memory of Holocaust survivors and thus also shaped the knowledge and non-knowledge about the Holocaust of those born later. In so doing, I seek to explore how the history of knowledge, and more specifically a focus on the “epistemic constitutive” nature of different, “entangled temporalities” as proposed by this special issue, might contribute to the broad field of Holocaust studies. Survivor testimonies have been described as crucial for our understanding and remembrance of the Holocaust.<sup>18</sup> By investigating how Holocaust testimonies have evolved through time, and indeed how time has shaped survivor testimonies, this article enriches our understanding of the conditions and the formation of society’s shared knowledge about the Holocaust.

I distinguish between four entangled temporalities that affect the narrated memories of witnesses in different ways. Memory is a constructive process that is shaped by *historical time* or the retention period. New experiences, hopes, disappointments, and expectations may have “retrospective effects” on memories, changing the meaning of the past and prompting the implicit or explicit back projection of later insights to the narrated past.<sup>19</sup> Individuals reconstruct

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13 Taubitz, *Holocaust Oral History*, p. 15.

14 Kushner, “Holocaust Testimony,” 275–76.

15 Wieviorka, *Era of the Witness*.

16 Jockusch, *Collect and Record!*, 11.

17 Lamers, Van Hal, and Clercx, “How to Deal”; Verburgt and Burke, “Introduction”; for an early inspiration, see Schlieben-Lange, “Vom Vergessen.”

18 Wieviorka, *Era of the Witness*.

19 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 262.

the past against the backdrop of present experiences, with memories being “altered, distorted, even fabricated, to support current aspects of the self.”<sup>20</sup> Memory is also affected by *biological time*. Memories change and fade with increasing age, but age can also change the priorities of memories, inhibiting some details while elevating others.<sup>21</sup> Narrated memory, again, is shaped by *recording time*, which, depending on the technology used, may confine narrated memory to shorter or longer periods and thus shape the interview and recollection process. Here, the spool length determines the length of the narrated memory and its richness of detail. Narrated memory is also affected by the specific *temporality of narrative*, which emplots memories in a succession of events along the narrative conventions of “describing development and change through time, with later states unfolding from earlier ones.”<sup>22</sup> In the process, memories are shortened, deleted, or glossed over, with certain connections made and others discarded. Here, again, the standpoint of the present plays a decisive role. The recollection is governed by its way of ending, to which the different episodes and their succession lead.<sup>23</sup> In keeping with my interest in knowledge production—and forgetting—as a communicative process, I also examine my own subject position as part of this temporal entanglement.

Given the lack of recordings or other testimonies of Trude Simonsohn from before 1983, my essay focuses instead on four interviews conducted with Izrael Unikowski, born in Kalisz, Poland, in 1927.<sup>24</sup> After the death of his mother in 1931, Izrael and his older brother were sent to an orphanage. After the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the two brothers and the other boys of the orphanage fled to Łódź. In 1940, the orphans were transferred to the ghetto in Łódź, where Izrael’s older brother died from tuberculosis. Later, Izrael was deported to the concentration camps in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He was the only one of his family to survive the Holocaust. Unikowski was one of 129 displaced persons interviewed by the American psychologist David Boder in 1946. His interview is therefore part of the earliest audio recordings of survivors’ testimonies.<sup>25</sup> Unikowski would be interviewed again in 1995, 1998, and 2004.

## What Happened to You? August 1946

During nine weeks from late July to early October 1946, David Boder, an émigré psychologist from Latvia based at the University of Chicago,

<sup>20</sup> Conway, “Memory and the Self,” 595.

<sup>21</sup> Pierce, Simons, and Schacter, “Aging and the Seven Sins.”

<sup>22</sup> Morgan and Wise, “Narrative Science,” 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, “Narrative Time,” 179.

<sup>24</sup> Personal File of Izrael Unikowski.

<sup>25</sup> Müller, “Translating Trauma,” 258; on early written surveys with survivors in the immediate postwar period, see Jockusch, *Collect and Record!*; Jockusch, “Zur Entwicklung jüdischer Zeugenschaft.”

interviewed 129 Holocaust survivors in displaced persons camps, shelters, and orphanages in France, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland.<sup>26</sup> Prompted by Dwight D. Eisenhower's recent call to the American press to go to the liberated camps to capture the impressions and emotions for the American public and driven by the wish to learn more about the psychological effects of trauma,<sup>27</sup> Boder traveled to Europe to conduct and tape interviews with Holocaust survivors. His recording device, built by a friend of his with huge wire spools [Fig. 1], was a precursor to the later magnetic tape recorders, and worked "as an effective tool of advertisement for Boder's interview project."<sup>28</sup> Usually, Boder joined a colony of displaced persons for lunch or dinner. "After the meal I would ask them to sing and, with their knowledge, I recorded the songs. When I played these back, the wonder of hearing their own voices recorded was boundless. Then I would explain my project and ask for volunteers."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, many interviewees emphasized later that Boder's wire recorder had been what had captured their attention.

And yet, it was this very wire recorder that long prevented researchers from engaging with Boder's recordings. Quickly becoming obsolete, institutions simply had no way to play them. In 1999, copies of the wire recordings were located at the Library of Congress, where they were converted to Digital Audio Tape and later into digital audio files. Surface noise made the voices difficult to understand and, in some instances, unintelligible, making time-consuming and costly audio restoration work necessary. In 2000, the first Voices of the Holocaust website was launched; as of late 2009, the recordings of all of Boder's 1946 interviews are available online, making it possible for me to listen, re-listen, and fast forward and backward through the interviews.

In August 1946, one of the young men attracted by the new device was Izrael Unikowski, who still remembered the recorder with the twenty-five-centimeter spools sixty years later.<sup>30</sup> Unikowski was nineteen years old at the time of the interview. Asked about his age in 1946, Unikowski dated his birth one year later, trying not to expose a previous lie: One year earlier, Unikowski had stated that he was younger in order to qualify for relief action for the liberated children of Buchenwald.<sup>31</sup> At the time of the interview, Unikowski was still staying at a children's home run by the Jewish relief organization OSE in Fontenay-aux-Roses, a southwestern suburb of Paris.

At the beginning of the interview, David Boder explained that the interviewee "should prefer to speak from a previously prepared, written story of his life." Unikowski had been convinced, however, "that we insist exclusively upon verbal reports without notes or memoranda. Eh...he is rather reluctant to do

26 On Boder, see Bernstein, "The Art of Testimony," 355–357.

27 Boder, "The Displaced People," 18; Boder, *I Did Not*, xi; Bernstein, "The Art of Testimony," 354.

28 Mehring, "Review," 145.

29 Boder, *I Did Not*, xii.

30 Wieviorka, Touboul, and Ringelheim, *Oral History Interview*.

31 Schuch, *Transformationen der Zeugenschaft*, 89–90.



**Figure 1.** David Boder at the wire recorder. Courtesy of Professor Yair Aharonowitz.

it, but he was convinced, by Dr. Reich and myself, at least to try. He said that is the first time in his life.”<sup>32</sup> Unikowski’s voice sounds young and cracks again and again. He sounds impatient when Boder repeatedly interrupts him to ask for details. Or is this perhaps excitement in view of the memories he is talking about for the first time?

I must concentrate to follow Unikowski’s narration. The recording hisses, I hear the spools squeaking. I hear train noises and the hum of airplanes. It is not always possible to clearly understand Unikowski’s words. The initial mix of languages—English, German, Yiddish—confuses me. Soon Unikowski switches completely to Yiddish.

We are quickly in the middle of the action, the settings changing rapidly. We learn of his mother’s early death, after which his father took Unikowski and his brother to an orphanage. The actual account begins with the invasion of Poland by the Wehrmacht. Unikowski structures his account around calendar time. After the German invasion, the orphanage staff left the thirty-two children behind on their own. On a Saturday, Unikowski and the other boys left Kalisz for Łódź. They spent the night in Poddębice, heard that Germans were approaching in the morning, continued their escape on Sunday, stayed overnight in Alexander, had to flee in the middle of the night, and arrived at Łódź at daybreak. With support from the Jewish council, they stayed in Łódź for two months. In winter, Izrael and his brother tried to travel to Russia, but nothing came of it. “The community gave fifty zlotys to everyone who wanted to leave Łódź. So it was said. Whether it was true I don’t know.” Doing some reading, I learn that this was in fact the first attempt by Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Jewish Council of Elders in the Łódź ghetto, to provide the required 50,000 names for deportation. Unikowski and his brother arrive in a village near Łódź, where they see a gigantic factory and see how people were beaten. Both are chased back—which was, as Unikowski explains, fortunate. One month later, the ghetto was built in Łódź.

Perhaps I am also irritated by the interviewee’s unusual choice of words. On the flight from the orphanage, I learn that the children rented a cart from “a Christian.” This expression, although entirely reasonable in the context of the time, is unfamiliar. Repeatedly, Boder, too, asks about individual words. At one point, for instance, Unikowski tells the interviewer that about ten days before Rosh Hashanah in 1942, Chaim Rumkowski, who ruled over the ghetto like a dictator, asked mothers to deliver their children for deportation. People built bunkers to hide, says Unikowski. When Boder asks, “What are bunkers?”, the interviewee chuckles and explains “Bunkers are what people dug: cellars, holes, attics...” Similarly, Unikowski refers to deportations as “oysziedlungen,” the euphemistic term used during the time of the ghetto. Both the choice of words and the language are still that of the narrated time. In this respect, Boder’s interviews, conducted in nine different languages, differ significantly from later

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<sup>32</sup> Boder, *Interview with Israel Unikowski*.



interviews which were conducted largely in English—and thus the language of the new life that survivors had built for themselves after the Holocaust.

So too does the temporality differ. As Unikowski begins to talk about his time in the ghetto, references to calendar time become fewer. Instead, he structures his account around the fourteen-day ration (three deca of turnips, forty deca of flour, and ten deca of oatflakes, and forty-five deca of sugar), by the arrival of new Jews and the repeated deportations, as well as by epidemics. From time to time, Unikowski points to Jewish holidays and seasonal time. We learn, for instance, that Chaim Rumkowski, instead of distributing the potatoes, let them rot in the frost, until they had to be thrown away. Three years later, people still searched for potatoes at the spot where they lay buried. He remembers the hunger in the ghetto, people swelling with hunger and dying, and still knows the food prices by heart. A deca of sugar, he explains, cost twenty marks. “How much is a deca of sugar?” asks Boder, and Unikowski hesitantly translates: “A hundred grams is ten deca. [...] And a bread has cost twelve hundred, thirteen hundred marks.” One of a few acts of translation. Each time, Unikowski pauses for a moment, hesitates. I am reminded of Henry Greenspan’s work on interviews with survivors in the immediate aftermath of the war. Greenspan suggested that these early interviews occupied “a precarious, often contradictory, middle ground,” conducted at a particularly fragile moment.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the interview with Unikowski seems to make this very in-between audible. It almost seems as if one could listen to him as he, in the act of translation, passes from one time to another.

Another fact that surprises me about Unikowski’s report is the striking juxtaposition of knowing about the fate of the Jews very early on—and of still clinging to hope and illusion. Unikowski remembers, for instance, the delivery of thousands of radishes whose leaves were cut off. People, he says, interpreted it as the work of the children and the old people who had been deported. Everyone knew that the deportations meant death, he explains, and still: “We deceived ourselves with stupid ‘songs’ and we believed that people are not going to their death.” In 1942, all 1,200 orphans were to be deported. Unikowski remembers that the children “sensed when we arose that something is not good on this day. It was a little chilly.” The children were told that the Germans only wanted to take a look at them. They should dress nicely and shouldn’t worry about anything. “We went with joyful faces. We went in a soldierly manner, with a ‘one, two, three, four.’ [...] We ... we ourselves couldn’t imagine. We didn’t know ... I can’t understand ... We were like this... as if we are going to [our] death, whoever leaves! But we were so content as if there was no deportation. We went out. We contemplated, ‘What will be, will be!’”

And yet, as his account makes clear, he and the others knew “that we are not going to rip radish leaves, but we are really going to [our] death.”

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<sup>33</sup> Greenspan, “Immediate and Violent Impulse,” 110.

Together with his brother and a few other boys, he managed to escape the deportation of orphans. Nobody noticed, because, as Unikowski explains, almost whispering, “there was an awful tumult, and we tore it off. We started out: one, two, three, four.” Together with four other children, Unikowski hid in the cemetery, the Beth-Olom, in the Tahre-chamber, where the dead were washed. In describing how his brother would fall ill with tuberculosis two years later, he nevertheless sounds calm, revealing the hopelessness of the inhabitants of the ghetto. Unikowski recalls his brother’s words: “Sure, I will die,” his brother explained, “but we will all die. One will die a little earlier, one will die a little later.”

I need time to engage with Unikowski’s account. It disturbs me more than most of what I have heard so far. Of course, I know about the violence and arbitrariness of German SS men. And yet I cringe when Unikowski speaks of their cruelty which went far beyond “just” following orders. He mentions a fourteen-year-old Hitler youth member, who passes by and cuts off the beard of an old Jewish man with a stiletto. He remembers an SS man who turns to one of the orphans who has lined up for their deportation, asking, “Oh, you little one. Do you know what is about to happen to you? You are all going to be shot.” Arriving in Buchenwald, Unikowski and others are harassed by the German block elder, who sprinkled soda and lime about the beds of the captives at night, which burnt their eyes.

Boder’s spool ends just after Unikowski tells him about the deportations of 30,000 children. As the new spool starts, Boder and his interviewee clash. Unikowski wants to talk about the actions of the police in the ghetto, but Boder interrupts him. “Omit the general stories.” Boder sounds impatient. He had traveled to Europe with two hundred spools, with each spool allowing for thirty-three minutes of interview. This meant that only a limited amount of time was available for each interview, interrupted by a lengthy set up phase to insert a new spool. Indeed, Boder had originally planned to limit each interview to fifteen minutes, which would have allowed him to conduct 400 interviews—a plan he quickly discarded.<sup>34</sup> In addition to limited recording time, his own time was also limited: Boder had to be back in Chicago for the fall term and hoped to interview as many displaced persons as possible by then.<sup>35</sup> Probably worried that he might not have enough spool time, he urges Unikowski to not talk about the “general,” which might already be known. Unikowski, however, insists. “I think that the general stories are more significant than my own.” “Yes, but that was already written about. I want your story. [...] It went very well so far, didn’t it? So, what happened to you [Also was hat Ihnen passiert?]? Did you return? You will someday write a good book about it. Nu?” At this moment, Unikowski chuckles somewhat disconcertedly. Boder already assumes that Unikowski will, one day, with the

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<sup>34</sup> Boder, *Memorandum*; Boder, *Letter*.

<sup>35</sup> See Rosen, *The Wonder*, 57.

distance of the time past, be able to turn his experiences into a captivating story. As Unikowski's pained laughter and his silence suggest, such remarks seemed offensive in view of the immediate proximity to the historical events.

Upon repeated listening, I realize that the fact that Unikowski has not yet turned his experiences into a cohesive narrative is one of the most fascinating, but also irritating features of the interview. Unikowski narrates largely chronologically, but his account has not yet taken on the coherence and linear dynamic I associate with other survivor testimonies I have previously heard. It is this rawness which Alan Rosen probably had in mind when pondering the difference between the "continued lack of mastery of one's own story at this early stage of recounting" manifest in the interviews conducted by Boder and later survivor testimonies.<sup>36</sup>

Asked about an apparent inconsistency in his memoirs, *If This Is a Man*, written immediately after liberation, Primo Levi once asked he be granted "the right to inconsistency: in the camp our state of mind was unstable, it oscillated from hour to hour between hope and despair. The coherence I think one notes in my books is an artifact, a rationalization a posteriori."<sup>37</sup> Comparing Unikowski's early account with other, later testimonies, the influence of historical time—in this case: how little time had passed between narrated time and narrative time—seems to manifest itself mainly in this lack of rationalization and coherence that seems so irritating at first.

And yet, despite the sense of immediacy that Unikowski's interview evokes, for Boder, the time of the interviews already seemed painfully late. Boder had originally planned to travel to Europe in 1945, when "the impressions [were] still alive in the memories."<sup>38</sup> Boder was concerned about "the failure of human memory and the fading of emotions due to time," but he also feared that stories would change as the present turned out differently than expected.<sup>39</sup> Boder's notes are a vital reminder that historical time can shrink or stretch depending on the temporal position of the observer. While Saul Friedländer, writing in 2008, described Boder's interviews as having been conducted "immediately after the war," Boder lamented that they had not.<sup>40</sup>

### Talking from Fifty Years Hence. October 1995 and March 1998

Almost fifty years after the interview with David Boder, Izrael Unikowski was interviewed again. By then, he called himself Jack Unikoski and lived in Australia. The three-hour interview in October 1995 was conducted by Moshe Morris, a volunteer working for the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>37</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 180–81.

<sup>38</sup> Note of April 1945, quoted by Boder, *Addenda*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Boder, *Memorandum*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Friedländer, "The Years of Extermination," 145; see Rosen, *The Wonder*, 58.

Fifty years is a long time. The young voice of Boder's interview has changed decisively. He is now speaking English, switching only in a few instances, and each time hesitantly, to Yiddish or German to reproduce the original wording. His hair is thinning and white on the sides. He wears glasses. About thirty minutes into the interview, Unikoski explains, "I have not prepared for this interview. It took me a long time to take the courage to come for this interview. I appreciate what you're doing and I know how important it is to have done it."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Unikoski, who is sixty-eight at the time of the interview, repeatedly seems at a loss for words, trying to recall names, trying to remember other details. "I talk from fifty years hence," he explains at one point, apparently asking for understanding for any memory lapses.

And yet, in the main features, the narratives of 1946 and 1995 coincide. The escape, the ghetto, the deportation—the facts match. Important details, however, differ. The ambivalences and the simultaneity of knowledge and hope which Unikowski had described so impressively in 1946 have completely disappeared. "Now, I don't know if the Jews realized that they're going to be killed," he explains when talking about the deportations of children. Fifty years prior, he had been sure that everyone knew. Similarly, he claims that the announcement of the deportation of the orphans was the first time he realized that he and the other children may not survive. "Up 'til then, I thought: All right, they hang a few Jews [...] on the Balater Platz when somebody stole a pair of [...] It was enough to hang. [...] But I still thought there's some sort of order, some sort of [...], but if you behave, if you don't steal, maybe you work, maybe you survive. But then I realized: no." The second time that he thought that he may not survive, he claims, was when he and the others had to take a bath in carbolic acid in Buchenwald. "We came out, and it was January, [...] ice formed on the body. Because we were standing there, it was no towel given, naturally, so ice formed on the body. And then a second time I thought: No one of us is going to survive. Sooner or later, we are all going to die." In his first interview in 1946, Unikowski had explained that his brother, who was suffering from tuberculosis, had said the very same sentence one year earlier in the ghetto in Łódź. Now he attributes the sentence to himself and dates it later. It is only a detail, and yet it seems striking that Unikoski claims not to have known about the fate of the Jews during the time of the ghetto.

Indeed, Unikoski now describes the years in the ghetto and before in a much more positive, more conciliatory light. In 1946, Unikowski had explained that he and the other orphans, when arriving in Łódź from Kalisz, had shown Rumkowski a document from the Kalisz Jewish community to permit them shelter. Rumkowski, however, had refused to help, explaining, "'Kids, I have nothing with which to help you.' He led us into all the rooms. The bureaus were overturned...disorder...and he returned the paper. 'With me, you can't remain. You will die from hunger.' We left the paper in his hand

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<sup>41</sup> Morris, *Interview with Jack Unikowski*.

and went down.” Coming down, Rumkowski had thrown the document after them, “down the stairs.” Only a few hours later he had changed his mind and allowed the children to enter. In 1995, by contrast, Unikoski points out that Rumkowski had never sent the children away, but instead immediately told the director of the children’s home in Łódź to give them shelter: “I am in charge, and I order you to take them in. And that’s how we came in this orphanage on the Pomorska No. 19.” Similarly, Unikoski describes Rumkowski now as a “benefactor.” “In comparison to the normal population, we were reasonably well fed. When I say ‘reasonably:’ of course, it was hunger. But nothing in comparison to the general population.” While apparently aware of the bad reputation of Chaim Rumkowski, explaining that “history judged” that “Rumkowski was a collaborator with the Germans,” Unikoski explains that Rumkowski “practically saved my life.”

I feel reminded of Trude Simonsohn, who repeatedly claims to have been “lucky” in the interviews in the 2000s and 2010s that I found on YouTube. I suspect that the integration of the lived future after 1946 may have changed Unikoski’s narrated memories. Between the narrated time and the time of the interview lies a life, a wedding, the birth of two sons. The passing of biological and historical time meant in Unikoski’s case not only that he had forgotten certain details, names, and contradictions, but also that he had been able to build a life for himself. Was perhaps this version of events also easier to live with? Memory, after all, is also a reconstructive, reassembling process driven by the force or demand of coherence. To make memory consistent with a person’s current self-image and beliefs, coherence “acts at encoding, post-encoding remembering, and re-encoding, to shape both the accessibility of memories and the accessibility of their content” and in so doing supports current beliefs about, and knowledge of, the self.<sup>42</sup>

Certainly, the changes in Unikoski’s account may also be attributed to the temporality of its new narrative form. In the first report, Unikoski gave a detailed account of his time in the ghetto. He reported on the fear, the hunger, the illnesses, giving a clear sense of the uncertainty he had felt about his own survival back then. Now the time in the ghetto has shrunk to the mere ‘before.’ It is, according to the temporal conventions of a narrative, the time *before* the concentration camps and thus, relatively speaking, a good time. The permanent anxiety during the time in the ghetto, so impressively conveyed by the first interview, has vanished from Unikoski’s account. What earlier contained such a presentness has turned into a mere past, building a single line of development. Both factors conform to what literary critic Gary Saul Morson has called “foreshadowing” or “backward causation,” with everything tending to the known ending.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Conway, “Memory and the Self,” 595.

<sup>43</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*.

In a similar vein, missing are any details not of immediate significance for the development of the story. The poster claiming “Der Führer hat Euch freigemacht” that allowed Germans to shoot whoever they liked; the fourteen-year-old Hitler boy who cut the beard of an old Jew; the SS-man who told a ten-year old orphan that all of them will be shot—all these details are missing. Instead, we only learn about those events which seem central to the unfolding of the story. And the interviewee moves confidently through this story, switching from one narrated past to another, from the general to the personal, and vice versa. “I’m going back to the ghetto now,” he explains at one point, testifying to his mastery over his own narrative. While Unikoski explains repeatedly that the course of his fate was coincidence, “pure chance,” that everything was a “casino,” the openness of the past, the terror of the young man just escaped has nevertheless vanished from his account.

Just like the 1946 interview, the 1995 one was limited by the spool hours available. However, unlike in 1946, when the interviewer had to rush Unikoski in his answers due to the limited numbers of spools he brought with him from the United States, the 1995 interview allowed Unikoski to pause to think and remember regularly as each tape now allowed three hours of recording. Only towards the very end of the interview, Moshe Morris explains: “We haven’t got a lot of room left on the tape, so I just want to ask you a couple of important ... what I think as important questions.” In the span of the, at this point, four minutes remaining on the tape, Unikoski is asked to summarize his life after his arrival in Australia in January 1949. For the first time, Unikoski looks at the camera, smiling, asking “I don’t know how much room you got left on the tape?” to which the interviewer replies “Four minutes.” “Well,” Unikoski continues, “I stayed there [in Melbourne], I got married, I was very lucky, I’ve got a lovely wife, I’ve got two sons [...], I’ve got a lovely grandson.”

Unikoski’s closing remarks invoke Morson’s term of “epilogue time”: “The important story is over, nothing essential will change, and so it is possible to describe in a few efficient strokes the unsurprising events constituting the rest of the heroes’ lives.”<sup>44</sup> Morson’s description fits well the almost comical compression of five decades into a single sentence. On second glance, however, this temporality does not only shape the single sentence at the end but expands to the almost three hour-interview before as well. Listening to the 1946 interview, I could feel “the throb of presentness in which choices are made.” In contrast, the 1995 interview feels as if “narrated at a distance [...], from a position looking down on the whole sequence,” transforming past presents into mere parts of the “finished pattern of the whole.”<sup>45</sup> This shift in historical and narrative time seems to mark a major difference between the two interviews and their effects on the listener.

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 191, 20.

I enter Unikoski's name in the search engine and come across one of his sons and a grandson. I read the poems and a scientific paper by his son Isi and feel a sense of relief. As if everything had gone well after all. Not only narrative, but also our reception of it, it seems, superimpose "the sense of an ending" on the openness of real experience, as if to counter the horror and haunting presentness of the past.<sup>46</sup> "The shape of narrative and the shape of real, lived time are not congruent," explained Morson in his 1994 book on *Narrative and Freedom*.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, nothing seems further away from the daily struggle and survival marking the narrated time than the conclusiveness and closure that the temporality of narrative favors, with all threads tied and tending toward the presents of narrator and listener, "like the solution to a mathematical problem with a familiar algorithm."<sup>48</sup>

In March 1998, Reuben Zylberszpic interviewed Unikoski again in Melbourne, this time for the Visual History Archive of the USH Shoah Foundation.<sup>49</sup> The interview, which lasted over five and a half hours, was recorded in Unikoski's living room. Behind the interviewee you can see a dining table with an oilcloth cover and two massive chairs. On the table is a bouquet of sunflowers. Unikoski is seventy-one years old by then. Unlike in 1995, he now refers much less frequently to memory lapses and the decades that have passed. Indeed, given the much longer recording time available for this interview, he even mentions new details about his life in the orphanage in the ghetto of Łódź, the deportation to Auschwitz, and life in the camp. By and large, however, Unikoski's responses bear a strong resemblance to those of 1995. In fact, those episodes covered in the earlier interview are retold almost word for word. He again calls Rumkowski a "benefactor," who "practically saved my life," and again refers to his own experiences during the time of the ghetto as "a good period. [...] In comparison to other people, it was rather a good time. [...] We were not starving." This recalls for me a sentence of Simone de Beauvoir on how a memory, once told or written down, is lost, as if one had relinquished sovereignty over it.<sup>50</sup>

### Time Drops. September 2004

In autumn 2004, the well-known French historian Anette Wieviorka and two other historians interviewed Jack Unikoski and his friend Georges Kestenberg in Paris.<sup>51</sup> This time, Unikoski explained that he did not wish to talk about

46 Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 179.

47 Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 39.

48 *Ibid.*, 21.

49 Zylberszpic, *Interview with Jack Unikoski*.

50 For a study on how memories are altered, reconfigured, and sometimes lost through the process of retelling, see, e.g., Bridge and Paller, "Neural Correlates."

51 Wieviorka, Touboul, and Ringelheim, *Oral History Interview*.

his experiences before and during the war. The interviews, he noted, “took a lot out of him.”<sup>52</sup> He therefore wished to only speak about the developments after 1945.

Unikoski’s remark that the interviews took a lot out of him points to the exhausting act of remembering the traumatizing experiences itself. Similarly, Jack’s friend Georges explained why he decided to not give another interview after the one with Boder in 1946: “[I]t was much too difficult because in the end afterwards you’re sick and then you remember things that are hidden in a corner of your brain and you don’t sleep nights, so there it is, it was perhaps a little bit of cowardice.” As this indicates, remembering may sometimes catapult the survivor “back into the traumatizing past as if through a time hole,” bringing to the fore memories that have long been repressed.<sup>53</sup> These “time drops” (*Zeitabstürze*) or involuntary re-encounters of past episodes can be triggered by acts of remembering, but also by listening to or watching the stories of others. Along these lines, Unikoski notes that he usually does not watch films about the Holocaust. Sometimes his wife will watch a film, and then “tell me it is safe for you to watch it or it’s not safe because sometimes I get nightmares at night and I cry out in the middle of the night so she protects me, she usually tells me watch it or don’t watch it.”<sup>54</sup>

Unikoski and Kestenbergs’ comments point to the impact of trauma that resists the linear direction of narrative temporality. Trauma is experienced as ongoing in its consequences, often being passed on from one generation to another. The time drops that trauma can cause, with an “ever-present past transform[ing] present and future in its image,” subvert conventional metaphors of time as resembling train tracks.<sup>55</sup> Like Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, who is forced to contemplate the catastrophes of the past, “which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet,” while blown into the future, this suggests an understanding of memory as Janus-faced, compelling us “to return again and again to trauma.”<sup>56</sup> Research on intergenerational trauma points out that this double movement is potentially infinite and cross-generational.

In the desire not to talk about his experiences up to 1945 lies a powerful reminder that the past, which Holocaust survivors’ testimonies tell of, can rarely be emplotted and tamed in a linear, cohesive account. Having no end and ongoing in its consequences, this past resists a straightforward chronology.

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52 See Schuch, *Transformationen der Zeugenschaft*, 260.

53 Blasberg, “>I’m there,<” 328.

54 Wieviorka, Touboul, and Ringelheim, *Oral History Interview*.

55 Auerhahn, “Dori Laub,” 380.

56 Childs, “Memory,” 65; Gutman, Sodaro, and Brown, “Introduction,” 1.



## Conclusion

One of the crucial endeavors of the history of knowledge is to challenge narratives such as that of a recent “explosion of knowledge.”<sup>57</sup> By examining how survivor testimonies have changed over time and, indeed, how different entangled temporalities have altered them, this article sought to explore what knowledge has faded into oblivion over time. In the face of thousands of thousands of hours of audio and video testimonies that have been recorded and collected since the late 1970s, such a perspective may seem surprising. And yet, as this article has argued, the comparison of different interviews conducted with the same person over a period of fifty years reveals, above all, the decisive influence of time—and that which is lost in time.

The older interviewee has forgotten, repressed, and glossed over. He now looks back on the experience with the distance of a lifetime. He knows what came later, implicitly integrating this “later” into his account as a new culminating point. Over the years and through retelling, he has arranged his experiences into a cohesive narrative, with one event following the other. Elements not immediately important for the progress of the story are left out. Others are oriented toward the experience of survival and the life thereafter. Provided that there is a video recording, we see an old person, which leaves a conciliatory impression, heightened by the air of calmness, which is also a result of the abundance of spool time.

Unlike what the more recent interviews or my own recollection of the encounter with Trude Simonsohn might suggest, however, the past has not lost its horror; it is still disturbingly present in the form of trauma. As both Kestenberg and Unikoski confirm, the danger of “falling back” in memory is as great as ever. Pressed in the form of a narrative told with temporal distance, however, this past has been tamed. It is these temporally tamed narrated memories that we preserve for future generations.

Early criticism of oral history approaches claimed that the evidence of oral history was “unreliable.”<sup>58</sup> Addressing this critique, scholars such as Christopher Browning have tried to prove the accuracy and historical reliability of survivor testimonies.<sup>59</sup> Unlike such attempts, the aim of this article is not to judge the factual accuracy of Holocaust testimonies.<sup>60</sup> Instead, the essay seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the effects of time on processes of recounting and forgetting and with them our reconfigurations and reconstructions of the past. Given the importance of survivor testimonies for remembering the Holocaust and the strong imbalance in favor of interviews conducted since the late 1970s—according to a recent estimate, more than 90 percent of

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57 Verburgt and Burke, “Introduction,” 6.

58 See Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 118–72.

59 Browning, *Remembering Survival*; cf. Fulda, “Ein unmögliches Buch.”

60 Similar: Schuch, *Transformationen der Zeugenschaft*, 30.

all Holocaust testimonies were recorded after 1979—more research on these effects seems vital.<sup>61</sup> Of course, such a perspective is not complete without other, perhaps complementary perspectives that explore, for instance, how different aspects of intersubjectivity have shaped Holocaust testimonies given at different times.<sup>62</sup> Only by incorporating these different aspects can we tackle the recording of testimonies as a “communicative process” and thus “analyze and comprehend knowledge in society and knowledge in culture.”<sup>63</sup>

In a thought-provoking essay, Ranajit Guha argued that communal belonging and empathy are predicated on a sense of “being with others in shared time” (see also Projit Mukharji’s article, this issue).<sup>64</sup> But does this sense necessarily depend on a shared contemporaneity? During his stay in Europe in 1946, David Boder recorded and played songs to attract potential interviewees to his project—recordings that he, fearful of running out of spool hours, eventually recorded over with the spoken interviews. At one point, Boder started recording songs that had been sung in the camps as testimonies in their own right.<sup>65</sup> Unikowski, too, sings three songs at the end of the 1946 interview, among them *Es Brent*, composed by the Kraków poet and musician Mordechai Gebirtig after a pogrom in Przytyk in 1936 (Gebirtig himself was murdered in 1942). It is an extraordinary experience to listen to Unikowski sing these songs once more, almost 80 years later. To listen, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy explained once, “is *tendre l’oreille*—literally, to stretch the ear—an expression that evokes a singular mobility.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, listening to Unikowski and other Holocaust survivors sing subverts a straightforward past–present–future chronology, creating instead a shared time where “the musical memories [...] are allowed to resound,” thus colliding past with present.<sup>67</sup>

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61 For this estimate, see Taubitz, *Holocaust Oral History*, 19.

62 See particularly Schuch, *Transformationen der Zeugenschaft*.

63 Secord, “Knowledge in Transit”; Lässig and Steinberg, “Knowledge on the Move,” 58; see also Sarasin, “Was ist Wissensgeschichte?”

64 Guha, “The Migrant’s Time.”

65 See also Toltz and Boucher, “Out of the Depths.”

66 Nancy, *Listening*, 5.

67 Toltz, “Ethnographic Holocaust Musical Testimony,” 195.

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