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The Social History of Jews in the Holocaust: The Necessity of Interviewing Survivors

*Steve Hochstadt**

Abstract: This essay urges the importance of collecting the oral history of survivors in order to create a richer and more accurate social history of Jews during the Holocaust. The special circumstances of the Holocaust have resulted in a documentary history which has been told from the perspective of the Nazi perpetrators. Only oral testimony can enable us to understand the actions and reactions of Jews faced with harassment, expropriation, exile, and murder. The practice of oral history was not originally designed for eliciting memories of traumatic events. Holocaust oral history requires the historian to reject the positivist conception of the objective and distanced interviewer, in favor of a position as compassionate listener to painful personal experiences. Interviews can produce less mediated, more spontaneous versions of memory, which require sensitive interpretation. The oral histories of Jewish refugees to Shanghai are examined to demonstrate how careful reading and listening can elucidate the social memories, and thus the social history, of Jews in the Holocaust. The process of interviewing also helps the historian bridge the experiential gap with survivors, enabling a better understanding of their experiences.

What do you want me to do? I haven't prepared for this, I haven't thought about it, I must say, because we've been very swamped in recent days. I'm the department chairman now and I've been swamped with administrative problems, financial among others. So I haven't thought about it, let me try to focus. Maybe you can say a few words to help me to focus.'

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This opening statement in our interview in Otto Schnepf's Chemistry Department office at the University of Southern California in 1990 encapsulates several of the crucial differences between the recorded interview and conventional written sources of historical research. These differences have made the interview a controversial kind of historical evidence, whose creation and interpretation bring up difficult analytical problems unfamiliar to many historians. I will argue here that we can and must work through these problems, because oral survivor testimony is a necessary element in our understanding of the Holocaust. Holocaust interviews can provide a different perspective on the Holocaust and may even lead to a different history of the Holocaust than what we currently accept. By revealing the experiences of survivors who are less literate or played no leadership role, systematic interviewing can broaden the social basis of historical generalization. The problems of interpreting oral accounts are actually opportunities to gain new insights, but these opportunities are rapidly disappearing as the number of survivors dwindles.

Recorded interviews do not represent a new kind of historical source.² Since early in this century, voices have been recorded on film and on records. There has been little hesitation about using movies, newsreels, recorded speeches on radio and television programs, courtroom transcripts, even Nixon's White House transcripts as sources for historical analysis. The modern practice of taperecording interviews as historical sources was simultaneously pioneered after World War II at the Columbia University Oral History Research Office and at Israel's Jabotinsky Institute, not as a departure from historical tradition, but as a way of adding more facts to the archival record of notable events.³ The practice was called "elite interviewing", indicating the kinds of interview partners selected for their public importance.⁴ Oral history began as a primarily

¹ Otto Schnepf interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Los Angeles, June 7, 1990, p. 1. References to fully transcribed, printed and bound interviews show page numbers. Where page numbers are not given, a definitive transcription has not yet been produced. The quotations reproduced in this essay mirror as precisely as possible the words spoken in the interviews. No attempt has been made to "clean up" repetitions and interruptions. Ellipses indicate the few places where sections are omitted.

² David Henige reviews thousands of years of the practice of oral history without tape recorders in *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1982), chapter 1. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), ch. 2, covers the use of oral methods for many of the classic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians. Thompson's volume is the most thoughtful introduction to the field and practice of oral history and the importance of interviews as an historical source.

³ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 59. See the report of the Columbia project by Ronald J. Grele, "Oral History" (Columbia University: 1992), and a brief description of the work of the Jabotinsky Institute in Manfred Waserman and Nechama Ophir, "'VeHegadeta — And You Shall Relate the Tale': Oral History in Israel," *International Journal of Oral History*, v. 10 (November 1989), p. 223.

⁴ Eva MacMahan, *Elite Oral History Interviewing* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989).

biographical and political study. Social historians quickly adopted this technology, so that by the 1960s interviews were being conducted about national political issues as well as social and local history.⁵

These early projects, from major academic efforts to interview political leaders to local histories staffed by volunteers, tended to share a matter-of-fact approach to the process of interviewing. The purpose of the interview was to gather facts not already available from the documentary record. The interviewer, like all good historians, was supposed to be:

a disinterested observer, a collector of information who had no biases or interest in the particular interpretation being offered by the interviewee. . . . the goal was to help build the research as distinct from the task of the historian, which was to interpret that research. . . . the interviewer was a distanced and "objective" collector of information.⁶

The content of the interview in this older tradition was determined by a set of questions prepared by the interviewer to elicit those facts deemed significant. Interviews tended towards oral analogues of written surveys. The process of transcription was seen as an integral part of this straightforward, fact-seeking process. Discussions of transcription note the wide differences between speech and written text, but tended to ignore the importance of transcribing decisions in determining the content of the transcript.⁷ Often the goal of the interview was to produce a usable printed transcript.

Over the past twenty years, this positivist conception of oral history has been replaced by a more theoretically informed understanding of the complex relationships between historian and interview partner,⁸ between interview and

⁵ Examples of the former include the J.F. Kennedy Oral History Program discussed by William W. Moss, *Oral History Program Manual* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), and the catalogs of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. Early social histories based on oral testimony include the works of Studs Terkel, beginning with *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Random House, 1970); Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975); Joseph H. Cash and Herbert T. Hoover, eds., *To Be an Indian, An Oral History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); and the Foxfire series on life in Appalachia. Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 274-283, provides an extensive list of oral histories by subject. The first major oral history project on the Holocaust was initiated by Yad Vashem in 1954: Waserman and Ophir, "VeHegadeta," p. 224.

⁶ Grele, "Oral History," p. 3.

⁷ An example of this more traditional approach is in Willa K. Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977), who is more concerned with the form of the transcript than with key decisions of how to translate sounds into typescript. Henige, *Oral Historiography*, p. 63-64, ignores this theme completely.

⁸ Many terms have been used for the interviewee, including subject, narrator, and informant. I prefer the word "partner", emphasizing the cooperative aspect of the interview. Kenneth Jacobson, *Embattled Selves: An Investigation into the Nature of*

transcript, and between history and memory. Each step of the interview process is now seen as a site of choices, uncertainties, and subjectivities.⁹ Objective, fact-oriented, distanced interviewing is particularly inappropriate for the sub-field of the Holocaust interview, where the historical subject is also invariably a personal tragedy. Careful consideration of the nature of the Holocaust interview is necessary in order to seize the opportunities for doing social scientific research presented by this unique source. This essay considers how systematic interviewing can provide a socially deeper understanding of the Holocaust. The key is to transform the subjectivity of an interview into historical knowledge through social scientific analysis.

Otto Schnepf's first words ("What do you want me to do?") indicate the importance of the interviewer. Although the purpose of the interview is to allow a knowledgeable participant in history to speak, the historian is heavily involved in creating the interview as a new historical source. The historian selects partners to interview, lays out an agenda for discussion, and fully participates in setting the mood of the ensuing conversation. Unlike virtually all other historical sources, in interviews the historian can shape the source to meet theoretical and practical needs, rather than rely on the fortuitous preservation of documents. This shaping may be both conscious and unconscious, as demonstrated by Alessandro Portelli, whose methodological work is most sensitive to the complex relationship between interview partners, and thus most useful for work with Holocaust survivors.¹⁰

This shaping extends to the choice of social standpoint, perhaps the most important contribution of oral history in general to the widening of the historical record. Only oral testimony can directly recover the perspectives and experiences of the great majority of humans who otherwise never enter the documentary record. Oral history transforms these excluded social groups into participants in the writing of their own history.¹¹ It makes historical research more social, more democratic, and more interesting, although possibly also more confusing.¹² This democratization of the sources has the power to shift the focus of historical work.

Identity Through Oral Histories of Holocaust Survivors (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), p. 14, also uses the term partners.

⁹ Some excellent recent general works on oral history provide an introduction to these issues: Thompson, *Voice of the Past*; Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1988); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, ch. 2.

¹¹ A few examples of this social widening are Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth, 1889-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981); Raphael Samuel, ed., *Miners, Quarrymen, and Saltworkers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

¹² Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 6, notes the potentially radical effect of giving voice

In the study of the Holocaust, oral history contributes to a transformation already in process for several decades: the shift from a history told by the perpetrators to one told also by the victims. Testimonies both oral and written have, for example, begun the work of recovering the myriad forms of resistance by Jews all over Europe, whose traces lie only in memories. I return to the significance of this shift in focus at a later stage in this essay. At this point it is important to note the limits on the ability of historical researchers to widen the social basis of Holocaust sources. It is doubtful that survivors represent a random sample of victims. Furthermore, those survivors who make themselves available for interviews do not necessarily represent all survivors. Barely any of those Shanghai refugees who write memoirs or do interviews come from the substantial minority who survived in China on the charity of Jewish welfare organizations, living in communal *Heime*, eating in mass soup kitchens.¹³ Oral methods extend the reach of the historian much further down the ladder of social status, but some social groups may still escape our notice. Those who find their experience the most humiliating may avoid the interviewer.

Yet even when the speaker escaped Europe without physical harm before mass murder began, as is the case with most Shanghai refugees, emotional pain is an unavoidable accompaniment of the Holocaust interview. The demeanor, body language, and perceived empathetic understanding of the interviewer can contribute to the willingness of the survivor to revisit that pain in order to describe personal tragedies. The Holocaust interview is crucially shaped by the behavior of the interviewer, or at least by the survivor's perception of that behavior. Thus, the objective, distanced and arbitrary interviewer of the older tradition might transmit precisely the wrong messages to the survivor. Lawrence Langer, in his study of videotaped testimonies, emphasizes the importance of the interviewer's ability to abandon the "normal" world we live in and to believe the unbelievably inhuman atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis, in order to help the survivor get beyond a natural sense of futility in relating these stories.¹⁴

to those not in authority. Samuel Schragger argues that objections to oral methods from historians may "hide ideological considerations about *what* aspects of *whose* experience are to become part of the record": "What is Social in Oral History?" *International Journal of Oral History*, v. 4 (1983), p. 90.

¹³ In the small world of Shanghai survivors, contacts between researchers and potential interview partners are typically made at the periodic reunions of the "China hands". In my observation, those who suffered most in Shanghai, both in material and psychological terms, do not generally attend the reunions and are not as interested in discussing their years in Shanghai.

¹⁴ Langer, in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), describes examples of interviews in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale where interviewers contradicted survivors' analyses of their own behavior (p. 58-66) or prevented them from describing horrific camp experiences by ending the interview (p. 28, 116-119).

The Holocaust interview requires that some traditional notions about oral history be abandoned. For example, one of the best-known writers on oral history, Trevor Lummis, believes that revelations about the interviewer's background could bias an interview.¹⁵ While that might often be the case, the success of the Holocaust interview depends upon bridging the enormous gap between the survivor's memories and the professional world of the interviewer. Because the Holocaust interview implicitly requests the survivor to reveal personal pain, even humiliation, similar kinds of revelations on the part of the interviewer can lessen the natural inhibitions against such telling.¹⁶ The Holocaust interview creates a partnership in tragedy, even if temporary, in which the interviewer's role is not merely passive.

Schnepf's statement that "I haven't prepared for this, I haven't thought about it," indicates another crucial feature of the interview which differentiates it from conventional written sources. The spontaneity and informality of conversation contrasts with the careful rethinking typically lavished on written sources. The tape recorder captures the first formulations of the speaker, as well as those immediate reformulations which make recorded conversation so ungrammatical. The interruptions of story line, digressions, and lack of continuous chronology which characterize conversation are edited out of published works. Yet these less controlled parts of the eyewitness narrative are crucially important in Holocaust testimonies. Langer demonstrates that fundamental discontinuities in Holocaust experiences are reflected in the spoken narratives of survivors. He uses the concepts of discontinuous time and discrete forms of memory ("common" and "deep") to explain the unexpected shifts in survivor narratives.¹⁷ Survivors may not yet have been able to integrate certain traumatic events in their past into a smoothly continuous narrative chronology; to do so might seem to trivialize those events, such as the death of a family member, or make them seem inevitable or explicable. Yet it is important to the survivor that these events be part of their testimony and their memory is never far from consciousness. Thus a seemingly slight connection to a story being told may trigger their interruption. These interruptions are not the digressions from the narrative line that they appear to be, but rather are the point of the entire testimony. Their significance is thus demonstrated in a

¹⁵ Lummis, *Listening to History*, p. 57. In other respects, Lummis' book is a fine survey of oral history. Yet this instance indicates the problematic situation of asking survivors to tell their lives. Thompson, *Voices of the Past*, p. 158—159, cautions that interviews with survivors require great caution and sensitivity. These general caveats, while necessary, are insufficient preparation for the special nature of the Holocaust interview.

¹⁶ From my experiences interviewing Shanghai survivors, I believe that my family background as the grandson of Viennese refugees to Shanghai serves to encourage my interview partners at all stages of the process, beginning with the initial request for an interview. Of course, this belief cannot be empirically confirmed.

¹⁷ Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, ch. 1.

different manner in the interview than in the more crafted narratives in written sources. The discontinuous interview can present a more accurate reflection of the survivor's memory than the polished published memoir.

This is one indication that the conversational interview and the memoir lie in different genres of story-telling. While the factual basis may be similar, the art is distinct. The distinction in genre is understood by narrator and by audience; the interviewer, as well as future tape-listeners or videoviewers, expect different vocabularies, grammars, and structures than readers would. This distinction is what makes the transformation of the oral interview into a printed transcript problematic, although the analytical issues involved are rarely addressed. The older tradition of oral history assumed the audience or user to be a reader, so that the purpose of the interview was to produce a transcript.¹⁸ As oral history evolved, it was recognized that different projects with different purposes and potential audiences should select appropriate rules of transcription and editing.¹⁹ I would argue that transcription is actually translation, from a more complex genre to a simpler one. While both genres use words, the spoken interview includes changes in pitch, loudness, and speed, pauses of variable length, sounds which are not words, gestures and physical movements. The latent significance of the following excerpt from Otto Schnepf's interview is clear

... an older brother, my mother also had an older brother, and his family involvement, he stayed there and, well whatever, his wife was quite ill and he didn't want to leave, she was not Jewish, it was complicated, it was a very, it was probably to a great part because my grandmother did not want to leave that son there that she never, she didn't leave. So neither of them ever got out.²⁰

But even if the transcriber faithfully records and labels every sound on the tape, how can words on a transcript fully convey the fact that Schnepf's voice gradually trailed off and his face was overcome by an emotional reaction as he explained why his grandmother and uncle did not leave Vienna with his parents?²¹

¹⁸ See Grele, "Oral History," p. 2. An indication of how this approach could shape interview content is provided by Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, p. 38: "By strict adherence to a topical outline of questions, by reinforcement of the narrator's awareness that she is 'on the air', and by turning off the recorder when the conversation wanders from the outline, it is possible to produce a well spoken and well organized transcript that will require little editing."

¹⁹ Despite her positivist orientation, Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, ch. 7, does discuss possible transcribing and editing choices.

²⁰ Otto Schnepf interview, p. 5.

²¹ Otto Schnepf interview, p. 5. I am indebted to Karin Grimme, a transcriber in Berlin, for the knowledge that for some psychological interviews, she was asked to note and label every sound on the tape.

Yet the transcript, even after being shorn of the interview's emotional cues, may still be more capable than most memoirs of displaying the gravity of such an event. Only the unusually talented memoirist can achieve the literary fluency needed to translate high emotion into printed language. Thus published Shanghai memoirs, while stressing the significance of the leave-taking in Europe, cannot match the power of speech in this description of how one nuclear family escaped after *Kristallnacht*:

... there are three tickets available, but of course they want extra money. So, as I said, at that time we still had some money, so my father paid it, and we got the passages to Shanghai. And we had to, whatever, I mean, the store was destroyed and whatever we had, our furniture, we had beautiful furniture, we had to sell it for next to nothing. And we were allowed anyhow to take ten marks out. That's all. Ten marks. And then we went to Shanghai. And we were the only ones from my family. All my other family, from my father's side, my mother's side, stayed there, and they are gone in the Holocaust. None of them got out. Not one. I'm the only survivor of my family.²²

The force of five repetitions of this solitude of survival breaks through the narrative continuity precisely because of their spontaneous artlessness.

The complex, multi-layered content of spoken testimony leads to considerable problems for the historical interpreter. We know how to order the events of a family's partial escape from the Nazis in a wider narrative of European Jewry's collective decision to emigrate or not, although this crucial aspect of Jewish action has not yet been properly analyzed. Had Schnepf written a memoir, similar information about that event might appear in written form, but what does the historian, trained as an evaluator of palpable artifacts, including paper documents, do with fleeting and ambiguous patterns of sound and emotion? Our traditions of source criticism, developed over hundreds of years of historiographical practice, do not cover these new problems. Langer's work, for example, offers us some starting points, but we still have far to go.

If Langer is correct, though, in his belief that spoken testimony gets closer to the real memory structures of the narrator, as I believe he is, then the journey is worthwhile. Interviews are not just more complex than written accounts, but they are a prior form of narrative, an earlier stage of the translation of memory to narrative form, which occasionally ends up as a written account. The conversation provides us with a glimpse into that translation process, which also takes place in the production of all written documents. This difference

²² Gerald Bigus interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Laguna Hills, California, June 9, 1990, p. 3. This excerpt can be compared to the same scene described in published memoirs: Ernest G. Heppner, *Shanghai Refuge: A Memoir of the World War II Jewish Ghetto* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 30, and I. Betty Grebenshikoff, *Once My Name Was Sara* (Ventnor, NJ: Original Seven Publishing Company, 1992), p. 39—40. Heppner's book is the best introduction to the entire subject of Jews in Shanghai.

between oral and written accounts might be seen as an advantage for some historical questions. The apparent weaknesses of oral accounts, such as different levels of memory, emotional response, digression, inaccurate recall, and deliberate avoidance of the uncomfortable are present in every document, whether it is the Protocol of the Wannsee Conference or a report from an Einsatzgruppe on the Soviet front. Yet written documents are clearly privileged in historiographical practice, beginning with the collection activities of archivists.²³ That privilege lies deep in our cultural reverence for the printed word. Printing lends permanence to one version of an author's understanding, while we generally assume that an oral narrative is continuously in process of creation and will not be identically formulated in the next telling.²⁴ Yet the written document's physical permanence and unchanging character do not insure the immutability of the story which lies behind it. A document is a permanent record of an understanding at a particular time, much like the interview. The similarities in the origin of oral and written accounts tend to be hidden from view by the conscious editing process which authors use to put written language into conventional forms. It is the loss of information through that editing that makes historical analysis difficult, not the presence of additional information in recorded conversation. We must simply learn how to mine the additional riches provided by spoken testimony.²⁵

Can we analyze the verbal clues in interviews to gain more understanding? How do outbursts of emotion or deep memory, discontinuities in narrative, and spontaneous ways of phrasing contribute to the historian's task of analyzing the Holocaust? Another way of putting this question is to distinguish what is remembered from the way it is remembered and told: can the latter also contribute to analysis of the former? Particularly because the Holocaust is so far outside our experience, I would answer yes, offering some examples from interviews with refugees to Shanghai.

²³ Omer Bartov notes historians' assumptions about the superiority of documents over memory and the resulting dominance of perpetrators' documents in Holocaust historiography: *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 101-102. Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 101-108, demonstrates the fallibility of written sources and their less obvious reliance on memory. Reproductions of the documents mentioned above can be found in volumes 11 and 10, respectively, of *The Holocaust: Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes*, ed. John Mendelsohn (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1982).

²⁴ Portelli discusses the "fluidity of oral narratives" and offers a number of explanations of why an account might change over time in his three methodological chapters of *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*; quotation on p. 62.

²⁵ Both Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p. 17-20, and Thompson, *Voices of the Past*, p. 244-245, juxtapose written and spoken versions of the same events to illustrate the differences in form, which lead to differences in content. Langer's contrast between written and spoken Holocaust narratives is in turn criticized as too strong by Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: history, theory, trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 194.

Virtually every Shanghai interview contains a section on the brutal treatment meted out to refugees by a Japanese administrator in the ghetto, Kanoh Ghoya. Ghoya had the authority to grant passes to refugees so they could leave the ghetto during the day to work. He was capricious, excitable, and occasionally brutal.²⁶

But in order to get the passport, that was a different story. We had to apply for that passport, and the opportunity to work outside of the ghetto, at a, at an office, standing in line, queue-type, until it was our turn. And sometimes he would grant us the passport, and other times he would say, »Why do you want to work in Shanghai? You don't have to. You stay in Hongkew. Get job in Hongkew. Refused.« And that was it. . . . And I was lucky, he just said that in a very firm, stern voice, very loud, very rude, but that was all. But in some other instances, with some of the men, he verbally, he really abused them. He hit them and beat them, it happened, too. Not too often, I believe, but at times.²⁷

In this description of Ghoya's extremes of behavior, typical of many others, anti-semitism plays no role. Ghoya did not threaten the lives of Shanghai refugees, although his outrageous treatment of some Jews, especially those much taller than he, did make it much more difficult for them to scrape together a livelihood. What can be gleaned from Ghoya's ubiquitous appearance in spontaneous recollections and from the deep resentment that his name brings up, is that the face-slaps represented the brutal extreme in Japanese treatment of most Jewish refugees.²⁸ Otto Schnepf analyzed the psychological wounds, which the Nazis opened and Ghoya perpetuated.

And then I had to go to that police station. You know, of course, I had, I'd been scared silly of this, of these Japanese, I must say. And I had to go there to get issued a pass, and so forth, and it was always a very traumatic experience (unintelligible). And then that time I was very frightened, for one I was frightened (unintelligible). I don't think it's specifics. The important thing is when you face, I had had that, of course, in Vienna, and then again here. You see, when you face sort of a power, where you're completely powerless, you're completely in their hands, you know, that is something that goes very deep, and I have great trouble with that, just great trouble, accepting that. And so I, that's a lot, I have very deep impressions from that.

²⁶ Ghoya is described by Heppner, *Shanghai Refuge*, p. 114-115, and James R. Ross, *Escape to Shanghai: A Jewish Community in China* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), p. 205-207.

²⁷ Martin and Susie Friedlander interview, p. 28. This is Susie Friedlander speaking. At this point Martin interrupted to offer his opinion that Ghoya was justified in being skeptical, since some refugees lied to him.

²⁸ In fact, there were some rare deaths of refugees due to the Japanese occupation. Several Polish Jews were deliberately jailed in disease-infested cells for disobeying the order to move into the Ghetto; they later died. Other instances of deadly Japanese brutality are described by Ross, *Escape to Shanghai*, p. 184-193.

Now, of course, one says that these things are so important, depending on what happened in my early childhood and so on, you know, who knows. But this is a big thing. And I felt that very, very strongly again there. At that time, already, of course, I was no longer a child, I was already, you know, reasonably grown up. And so I really felt very, very upset about that, very frightened also.²⁹

These transplanted Europeans were able to preserve their sense of indignation at non-lethal physical violence throughout their Shanghai experience. That indignation is as much a fact of their historical experience as the physical incidents themselves.

Another facet of that experience mentioned in nearly every interview deepens this insight the accidental bombing by American planes of some houses in the section of Shanghai where the Japanese military authorities ghettoized Jewish refugees between 1943 and 1945. Raids by American bombers on Japanese military targets in 1945 were welcomed by European Jews in Shanghai as a signal that the war was nearly over. But on July 17, 1945, bombs fell into the ghetto, killing about thirty refugees and hundreds of Chinese.³⁰ Fifty years later Shanghai survivors invariably recall this incident, even when they were not physically present at the site.³¹ Walter Schnell was describing the kitchen at one of the communal *Heime* in Shanghai when suddenly the deep memory of the bombing broke in:

I mean, they didn't eat, they didn't eat there. And they came there and also, they had also in the same place service on Saturday, but what happened one day was a terrible air, air, air raid. As a matter of fact, every day we got the alarm at, at nine o'clock in the morning. They came, they bombed, they bombed Shanghai, the Americans. But what happened one day, they made a mistake and they bombed the ghetto. And that was the worst, the worst thing. I think it was June 14, 19-, when was this, -45, -44, and lots people got killed, many people got killed, they came to the kitchen, picked the food on the way to, from the kitchen to home. So that was the worst, worst thing what happened. Beside of it, it was not only Jews, a lot of Chinese also.

²⁹ Schnepf interview, p. 28.

³⁰ It would be quite difficult to reconstruct this incident accurately from oral testimony. The number of Jewish deaths attributed to the bombing varies from interview to interview. The mixture of first-hand reporting and hearsay is impossible to disentangle, except with the most detailed and skeptical questioning. As Paul Thompson notes in *Voice of the Past*, p. 136, memories, and thus oral testimony, are most fallible on the specifics of events, but best on questions of consciousness and atmosphere. In the case of the bombing, it is less useful to try to derive the specifics of the event from an interview than to probe the psychological reactions of refugees for clues about its meaning in their lives.

³¹ For example, in his interview Gerald Bigus recalled only two exact dates during his Shanghai years: his father's death and the American bombing. In the memoir of Grebenshikoff, the bombing is the only exact date provided: *Once My Name Was Sara*, p. 79.

They, and I just happened to be there. They didn't, they didn't bomb the, the kitchen wasn't bombed, but the people who was on the street, on the Broadway. And I was afraid that where I lived, you know, that, that this place, you know, where I had all my things, but they didn't, didn't bomb that place where I lived in the camp. So anyway, that was the worst thing what happened, many, many people also from the leaden of the community got killed. That was the, the blackest day in, in there.³²

Schnell emphatically wants us to know that nothing he experienced could compare with this tragedy. Martin Beutler, ten years old at the time, defines this moment by noting that he and the children he knew were unusually frightened. He describes his shock at witnessing the Japanese beheading on the spot of two Chinese who tried to steal valuables from the corpses of bombing victims.³³ The impact of these sudden deaths reverberates through the intervening decades, becoming a talisman of unexpected mortality.

More than any other event, the bombing defines the physical limits of horror for Shanghai Jews, the conquering of survival by death. For the historian of the Holocaust, the discovery of this limit for the Shanghai experience serves to define the enormous gulf between Europe and Shanghai. The sudden death of thirty Jews in Shanghai in 1945 was shocking and unique; European survivors were surrounded by mass death. Judith Isaacson's description of her arrival in Auschwitz in an interview serves to demonstrate the distinction in experience.

On arrival, I noted that they threw down the dead right by the railroad tracks. We jumped off the train, but the dead were thrown by the railroad tracks. But they also took some of the old people and the sick and the one person in our wagon who went crazy during that trip, they threw them with the dead in the path. I escaped my family for just a minute, because I had seen this, to see what was going on. And I saw this huge pile, as tall as this room, of dead and dying and sick and crazy. And I recognized my former professor of French and German literature there, who went crazy . . .³⁴

We cannot recover Isaacson's immediate reaction to this nightmarish scene, for by the time she relates it many years later, she had been forced into deeper circles of the Auschwitz hell. She reserves her emotional emphasis for even crueler moments. Thus the flat affect in her description of piled up bodies contrasts with the regret in the voice of Walter Schnell. Fifty years later these reactions in the interview setting speak to us of different worlds of historical experience.

³² Walter Schnell interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Reseda, CA, June 6, 1990. Schnell could not correctly recall the date.

³³ Martin Beutler interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Berlin, June 29, 1995, p. 36.

³⁴ Interview with Judith Magyar Isaacson, Holocaust Human Rights Center of Maine Oral History Project, Augusta, ME, March 24, 1988, p.34-35. Isaacson also depicts this scene in *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 62-63.

I do not intend to minimize the persecution directed only at Jewish refugees by the Japanese authorities. Forced ghettoization increased the death rate due to malnutrition and disease, and deprived Jews of their livelihoods and freedom of movement for two years.³⁵ Coming on the heels of six years of brutal and deadly treatment by the Nazis before their successful escape, Japanese policy toward European refugees prolonged their feelings of homelessness and insecurity about survival to the end of the war. Yet the great majority did survive under a harsh military occupation, which displayed virtually no hostility to Jewish people as individuals or to Jewish religious practices. Ghoya, the most hated man in the ghetto, had the job of giving passes to Jews to leave the ghetto on a daily basis. He visited Jewish homes and schools, threatened people with his displeasure, and patted children on the head. He appeared at religious services, as did other Japanese officials.³⁶

Much is made of the comparison of official German and Italian treatments of Jews, as well as the different popular attitudes and behaviors toward Jews.³⁷ This is an important juxtaposition of two very different forms of fascism and anti-semitism. It is instructive to include the Japanese in this comparison, as the third ally. Despite the existence of pockets of anti-semitism in the government, the Japanese refused to submit to insistent German demands that they attack the Jews under their control.³⁸ In view of Goldhagen's stress and consequently the renewed controversy over the nature of German popular anti-semitism and its effects on the fate of the Jews, the descriptions of precisely what the Japanese did do and therefore what they did not do take on significance. For Americans and historians of America, the comparison of state treatment and popular ideology as revealed in the Japanese ghettoization of European Jews and American incarceration of Japanese-American citizens is also instructive.

³⁵ The Japanese issued a proclamation on February 18, 1943, ordering all recent refugees (that is, Jews from Central Europe) to move into a one-mile-square section of Shanghai, named Hongkew, if they did not already reside there, with a deadline of three months. The Hongkew ghetto was liberated by the arrival of American forces in August 1945. The text of the proclamation is reprinted in the standard history of the German-speaking exodus to Shanghai, David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1988), p. 489-490.

³⁶ According to Henry Rossetty, a band leader in Shanghai, Ghoya took lessons from the violinist in his band: Rossetty interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Laguna Hills, CA, June 8, 1990, p. 9. Ghoya invited another German musician to his home, sending a rickshaw to pick him up: Max Ackerman interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Los Angeles, June 7, 1990.

³⁷ See, for example, Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, and Survival* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

³⁸ The best work on Japanese anti-semitism, both inside and outside of the government, is David G. Goodman, *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

Survivor accounts are necessary to answer properly questions about perpetration. Because the documents of the perpetrators mask behavior and ideas in euphemistic language, avoid describing the worst atrocities, and contain evasions and outright lies, they can never provide us with a full picture. Only survivor testimony can complete the evidentiary record. That testimony might force the reexamination of conventional explanations. One of Daniel Goldhagen's important insights, often overlooked in the outrage over his bombastic arrogance, is that the rampant brutality visited by many German murderers on Jewish victims, including children, does demonstrate that a particularly virulent form of anti-semitism was at work.³⁹ Such revealing incidents are to be found in survivors' accounts. Portraits of the perpetrators as banal or emotionless murderers, drawn from evidence of Nazi bureaucrats, cannot suffice to explain this evidence.

I do not believe that the major importance of the increasing use of oral testimony in historical research will be to provide refinements to conventional narratives of the Holocaust. Survivor testimony offers a fundamentally different viewpoint of the Holocaust than we could achieve from the documents of the perpetrators. This shift is threatening and potentially problematic, but I would argue that it is necessary. Some reservations about reliance on survivor testimony have been expressed, notably by Raul Hilberg, which see the possibility of survivors supplanting those who did not survive as the focus of the public understanding of the Holocaust. The Holocaust could, in this view, become the site of heroic survival, of success stories of personal resistance, rather than the locus of gratuitous death and infinite suffering.⁴⁰ Raul Hilberg also complains that oral historians cannot interview the dead.⁴¹ This anxiety is not unfounded. Langer, for example, shows that some Holocaust interviewees try to refashion survivors' narratives into triumphs of the spirit, even when the survivors themselves refuse this interpretation.⁴² We must be aware of the natural tendency to focus on life and avoid death. But we are always faced with the possibility of willful misinterpretation of evidence to fit preconceived ideas or comfortable categories. The danger of misuse should never prevent the full proper usage of sources.

³⁹ Many descriptions of gratuitous cruelty in death camps, work camps, by police battalions, and on death marches are scattered throughout Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

⁴⁰ There is little in print spelling out the controversy over the use of interviews. A brief indication of the arguments involved is given in "Remaking the Holocaust?" *Boston Globe*, January 3, 1996, p. 53, 58.

⁴¹ *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), p. 132-133.

⁴² Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p. 58-60, 63-64.

In that proper usage lies, I believe, the real challenge to conventional Holocaust histories. The most significant historiographical debates have long revolved around the perpetrators and their documents: when was the decision made to kill all the Jews and who made it? was this decision a reaction to wartime circumstances or part of the Nazis' original intentions? what was the role of antisemitism? Even Goldhagen's claim that he is overthrowing fifty years of Holocaust research rests upon the same viewpoint: why did the perpetrators do it? In much of Holocaust writing, the insiders are the Nazis, while their victims are objects whose actions and reactions are secondary to the main story. This is certainly true of the work of Hilberg, whose memoir offers a clear argument for the superiority of documents to oral sources.⁴³ Of course, this places Hilberg squarely in the center of historiographical tradition, both in history generally, and in social science history in particular. The unique situation of the Holocaust, however, means that a document-based social history of the persecuted Jewish people is impossible. Documents produced from within the Jewish community, especially after 1941, are so rare and so distorted by the need for secrecy that a history based on them is inevitably a history through official German eyes. Many areas of the social history of Jewish response to Nazi persecution for the entire period from 1933 to 1945 cannot be explored by traditional social scientific methods.

The accumulation of oral testimonies and the increasing attention to the victims' perspectives may eventually allow researchers to write histories of the Holocaust from within the Jewish community, where the insiders are Jews, whose individual motivations and behaviors created collective responses to their tragic circumstances. These testimonies will not only contain evidence about events, but also evidence about states of mind, about understanding. Dori Laub, the co-founder of the Yale Video Archive, told of an interview with a woman who described the uprising in Auschwitz on October 6, 1944. Her entire speaking style changed as she passionately recounted seeing four crematorium chimneys in flames. Laub noted that her memory of precisely what she saw was incorrect: only one chimney was actually destroyed in the revolt. But the physical change which came over her during the retelling was wordless testimony to the meaning of this doomed revolt to an Auschwitz inmate.⁴⁴ Her reaction of exhilaration, even if temporary, is also a piece of the Jewish history of the Holocaust, which other interviews might confirm as a

⁴³ See the chapter entitled "Documents" in *The Politics of Memory*. This is also true of the ambitious recent study of Auschwitz, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, edited by Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994). Only in the Holocaust subfield of research on Jewish resistance do the victims really take over center stage. Nechama Tec's *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) is a fine example of this shift in viewpoint.

⁴⁴ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 59-63.

social fact within the community of Auschwitz at that moment. To understand her testimony requires new skills for historical researchers, among them a willingness to listen.⁴⁵

Listening to Otto Schnepf tell of the moment of farewell in Vienna offers, in turn, insight into the constructed significance of the moment of emigration. The emotional charge of the deaths of those left behind cannot be placed at the real time of their murder. Nor is there an appropriate moment of discovery, as the extent of genocide in Europe was gradually understood by emigrants at the end of an after the war. For the Shanghai survivor, the greatest personal tragedy occurred far away; the moment of farewell has become the signifier of this pain.

The significance of this moment is usually overlooked by treatments of the Jewish experience under the Nazis. Most European Jews, except for those who were murdered in their own villages, became refugees. For those who fled Europe, and even for many who stayed and survived, one of the most wrenching moments of this process was being torn away from home, out of the extended Jewish family. Although interviews repeatedly reveal the shock of the always too sudden destruction of home life, narrative accounts of the emigration process tend to treat this as simply a stage in a seamless continuum. Listening more closely to emigrants themselves, and not only to their words, might enable us to delve more deeply into the crucial moments of their shared experience.

Such social conclusions about shared experiences require multiple confirmation in many interviews. The inevitable uniqueness of the personal experiences recorded in an interview often deters social historians from using such sources. Yet the accumulation of thousands of such sources now allows social conclusions to be drawn from systematic comparison of individual experiences. The interview partners themselves can provide the key to social realities through their understanding of apparently idiosyncratic experiences. The Jewish family in German-speaking Central Europe was strongly patriarchal, even though married Jewish women often worked outside of the home.⁴⁶ The first six years of Nazi persecution, which was significantly economic, fell heavily on Jewish men, depriving them of those commercial or professional careers from which the entire family derived status. The mass arrests during Kristallnacht, which propelled many families to decide to flee to Shanghai, affected only men, leaving their wives to deal with the bureaucratic hurdles to emigration. Arrival in Shanghai could be a further blow to paternalistic self-esteem, since it was nearly impossible for the successful

⁴⁵ Portelli is the most astute commentator on the differences between the credibilities of oral and written sources, and on the value to historians of factually incorrect memories: *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, ch. 1-2.

⁴⁶ See Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

lawyer, manufacturer, or store owner to recreate the economic basis of familial authority.⁴⁷ Emigration to Shanghai often represented a transfer of familial power from men to women or from parents to children.

At least that is what an historian would surmise. Otto Schnepf both confirms the analysis and explains how it worked out in practice:

So during that period I was sixteen years old. And that's amazing really, in a sense.... I was very dominated by my father in Vienna, I got many, many negative messages about my being stupid, and my not being capable, and so forth, which many, many fathers do. I was not the type of son that my father wanted. He was a broad-shouldered, stocky sort of person, and to him I was always narrow and sometimes more sensitive perhaps, there was lots of judgmental messages and all that. And so I accepted that I was stupid, I guess, for awhile, because I, fact is, I almost failed my entrance examination to the gymnasium in Vienna, and I was very poor at mathematics, and you know, which was sort of dumb! And, well, you know, there are many interpretations one can put on those things, in no way absolute, but my . . . my one interpretation is that through this breakdown and through this emigration, my father simply lost power. And he was no longer a figure of power. So I got out from under that, and I suddenly was very good in school, you know, so that may have been ugly truth. But, so, it's interesting in this context that by that time, and I was considered a very strong, an important element, a strong element. . . .

As it turned out, I earned quite a lot, and I, I overdid it completely way beyond what was necessary, I'm sure. And I just took on this responsibility, basically. And then, so I was, I became the money, main money-earner, you see, of the family.⁴⁸

Schnepf is an unusually thoughtful man, doing the analytical work here himself. What appeared to him as an individual family problem, might appear to us as a gendered social experience, whose traces we might seek in further testimonies.

The need for a history of the Holocaust from the inside is demonstrated by the only partly superseded metaphor for Jewish response, that they went like sheep to their slaughter.⁴⁹ People are not sheep, who even among four-legged animals do not stand out for intelligence. When millions of Jews moved from one ghetto to another, lived under Nazi-created Judenräte, gathered at

⁴⁷ Unlike most professions, medical practice was transferrable to China, and many Jewish physicians were able to recreate their bourgeois life-styles in Shanghai. That this was not necessarily easy is illustrated by the case of my grandfather, described in an interview with my grandmother, Amalia Hochstadt, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Santa Monica, May 5, 1987.

⁴⁸ Schnepf interview, p. 17, 20.

⁴⁹ Michael Marrus wrote in his historiographical summary, *The Holocaust in History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 108, that this characterization of Jewish response is one of the most "durable generalizations about the history of the Holocaust."

Nazi-designated assembly points, climbed into cattle cars, even marched towards the gas chambers, they had not given up their individuality, their family solidarity, their allegiance to community, or their capacity to make decisions. The continued operation of these human qualities does not make the victims in any way responsible for their ultimate fate. Yet they shaped the way in which Jews lived and died. Documents of the perpetrators can never help us to retrieve these historical facts. Only systematic use of survivors' accounts, which are mainly available in oral testimonies, can recover the Jewish social history of the Holocaust in all of its human dimensions.⁵⁰

Contrary to the fears of those who worry that too many survivors' accounts will produce a Holocaust history of the heroic few, careful listening to interviews reveals survivors unwilling to distinguish themselves from those who were killed.⁵¹ The stress on luck as the major factor in survival is well-known in camp survivors' stories. Emigrants take a similar stance when asked why they chose to go when others stayed behind. They explain the manifold reasons why thoughtful Jews might stay, even after Kristallnacht. Otto Schnepf's aunt was quite ill, so his uncle, his mother's brother, did not want to leave; his grandmother stayed to be with her son. This concern for family members is typical of other stories, such as this from Melitta Colland:

My mother was the brightest woman you ever want to know in that respect, really. Because she already, long before Hitler came to Austria, kept saying, »I want you kids out of here. I want you kids out of here.« And nobody could really understand how a mother could push her son to go into Panama, because in those days, from Vienna into Panama, or Vienna into China, was like sending your own children into Siberia. You know? It was unheard of. And her friends used to say, »How can you, how can you even think of sending your son to China? How can you even think to send him into the tropics, into Panama?« She said, »I don't care. Anywhere else but here.« And we really owed her an awful lot in that respect.⁵²

Just as the prescience of Colland's mother saved her children, the desire of others to protect their families ruled Shanghai out as a place of escape.

⁵⁰ For the understanding of the Holocaust, Paul Thompson's argument for the value of oral history is most appropriate: "While historians study the actors of history from a distance, their characterizations of their lives, views, and actions will always risk being misdescriptions, projections of the historian's own experience and imagination: a scholarly form of fiction. Oral evidence, by transforming the 'objects' of study into 'subjects', makes for a history which is not just richer, more vivid, and heart-rending, but *truer*." See *Voice of the Past*, p. 98.

⁵¹ It also reveals the humiliation of survival, which is a major theme of Langer's. He argues that survivors' testimony is one of the crucial correctives to the retrospective tendency to romanticize survival as heroism: see *Holocaust Testimonies*, especially ch. 5.

⁵² Melitta Colland interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Portland, ME, September 30, 1989, p. 4.

Many Jews believed that Nazi anti-semitism was an aberration among the majority of decent Germans. This faith in the humanistic attachments of a well-educated, civilized European nation may seem blinkered in hindsight, but at the time Jewish faith in the German people was part of German Jewry's fundamental patriotism. Many older Jews, especially those who had served in World War I, continued to feel that their country could protect them, even if the government would not. Ralph Hirsch, the child of an educated Berlin family, explains:

I think for a long time until then, my parents and their circle thought that probably, either Hitler was sort of a temporary phenomenon or that the good Germans would put a stop to this kind of, this very sort of excesses. And when it seemed that that was a completely wrong hope, and they suffered these, vicariously mostly, these, these blows, because in a sense in my immediate family we were not affected, but we were affected through what had happened to other members of the family and various friends and colleagues. There was a lot of discussion.⁵³

These discussions about emigration referred to by Hirsch are not yet part of our histories, and can only be recovered in interviews.

By 1938 the alternatives to staying in Europe were not attractive. The favored destinations of emigration in North America, England, or Palestine were closed off to all but the wealthiest or the best connected. Rejection of emigration could be also a form of self-protection.

And my mother wasn't sure. No, she did not want to [go to Shanghai]. She, she had hardly any command of the English language. She didn't know what would lie ahead of us, for us in a strange orient-, oriental country, of which we didn't know anything about, whose language we didn't know, and the cultures and the, the whole customs, and everything sounded, not Chinese but very Greek to her, you know, as you say. And, no, she, oh, tears were spilled, and please, I don't want to go, you go and leave me here, and that would of course be horrible. No, we would not hear of it. And then I had a chance to go to England, to London, with a children's transport, which would mean I would be separated from my parents. Again, they did not want that. We stay together.⁵⁴

Most maligned by the metaphor of sheep are those thousands of Jews who tried desperately to get out but could not. Holocaust histories tend to assume that only the successful tried to leave. Many Jews were able to get to Shanghai, the least desirable destination, only because their families had sufficient money to pay exorbitant round-trip fares, as well as bribes, to get ship tickets. The poorest Jews, the least educated, with no relatives in New York or London,

⁵³ **Ralph Hirsch interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Shanghai, April 22, 1994.**

⁵⁴ **Martin and Susie Friedlander interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Tamarac, FL, February 21, 1990, p. 16.**

were silenced by the Holocaust and then criticized for their inability to control their fate. We can hear the echoes of their actions and responses, not those of sheep, but of thinking human beings, only if we listen closely to survivors' testimony.

I remember standing on my feet for hours, in long queues, in long lines, trying to get up to the door, where you were either let in or told that »No visas, no more visas«, and everybody turned around after six hours of standing there, cold weather, was still in the wintertime in February, and going home and trying another consulate the next day. Or all of a sudden, a rumor spread that the Cuban, somebody just came from the Cuban consulate, they were all pretty much in the same area, it was consulate row, the Cuban consulate said that they were issuing visas, so in five minutes this row had dissipated at the Dominican and everybody ran over to the Cuban, and then found out that that was a bunch of you-know-what and so it didn't work out all that well. And after doing this for months on end, my mother and father had friends, obviously, who were doing the same thing, someone called my mother and said, you know, we're getting tired of this whole thing here and we seem to be going nowhere. There is one place we can go, we just found out, if you want to go to China, say where the hell's Shanghai, where's Shanghai? Well, the other end of the world, terrible conditions, I mean, disease and vermin and, well my God, should we take, well, long and short of it was that there was no other choice. We couldn't get to America, we couldn't get to England, we couldn't go anywhere. So my mother, I guess in desperation, said, okay, fine, we'll go to Shanghai, what the heck.⁵⁵

Oral testimony recaptures the agonizing efforts to emigrate of those who succeeded and of the many who failed. The history of Jewish response to the Holocaust from the inside will be a different history than the conventional narratives we have accepted.

One more quotation can illustrate a final point about the need to embrace the subjectivities, not only of our interview partners, but also of our relationships with them, in order to do Holocaust history. Martin Beutler's parents separated soon after arrival in Shanghai. He pulls a childhood experience on the streets of the city out of deep memory:

... als Kind war ich eben viel mir selber überlassen, vor allem dann in der Zeit als ich mit meinem dann Vater zusammengelebt habe in der Chusan Road, bin ich viel unterwegs gewesen in der Stadt, viel spazieren gewesen, alles angeguckt, immer den Broadway hoch Richtung Garden Bridge und oft auch ganz alleine. Denn als ich eines Tages unterwegs war in der Nähe der Garden Bridge, stand ich vor meiner Mutter, und ich habe sie ansprechen wollen, und sie hat nicht reagiert und dann hab ich es also noch einmal ihr versucht, sie sah sehr gut gekleidet aus, und ich weiß nicht, ob ich ihr zu schmutzig ausgesehen hab oder warum, jedenfalls hat sie überhaupt nicht

⁵⁵ Curt Pollack interview, Shanghai Jewish Community Oral History Project, Shanghai, April 22, 1989, p. 2.

reagiert und mich praktisch, wie man, man umgangssprachlich sagt, links liegen lassen, also überhaupt nicht, weitergegangen, und das hat mich sehr, sehr betroffen und von da an hab ich eigentlich gemerkt, daß ich ohne Mutter aufwachse und habe mich von dieser Frau, die mich zur Welt gebracht hat, innerlich vollkommen distanziert, war richtig böse, war auf diese Frau, die mich keines Blickes gewürdigt hatte.⁵⁶

Herr Beutler was about seven years old when this happened. This narrative, completely unedited, is quintessentially colloquial, *umgangssprachlich*, flowing over sentence breaks, action and description intermingled, with spontaneous but precisely calibrated emphases. It was not said merely in order to present a complete autobiography to the tape recorder, but also to explain himself to me, to bridge the human space between survivor and historian. Although we are only twelve years apart in age, Herr Beutler experienced a different planet in those twelve years. The experiential gap between us, while not as daunting as that between camp survivors and interviewers that Langer describes, is still too great to leap by force of will. It can be progressively narrowed only by the experience of the telling. Books are irreplaceable, but I believe that the interview is the most appropriate telling for closing that gap.⁵⁷ Only by meeting Herr Beutler, actually only by getting to know him for six months before our interview as a very controlled, precise, and formally correct man, could I be able to understand what he really means by "*aas hat mich sehr, sehr betroffen*", and "*war richtig böse*". The Holocaust interview has a wider purpose than to produce new evidence. It can also directly help historians to understand the meaning of all of our evidence.

⁵⁶ Martin Beutler interview, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 8, stresses that the forced interaction with people, rather than with documents, can change and humanize the historian.