

Repatriation and Recovery:
The French Literary Response to the Holocaust

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by

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ABSTRACT

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For the French people, memory of the Second World War was, and continues to be, a difficult subject. The Vichy government, led by Phillipe Pétain, is unique in contrast to those of other occupied countries because of its collaborationist aims, and its participation in the deportation of its Jewish citizens. Standing in stark contrast to this are the ideas of Charles de Gaulle, the postwar leader of France, which included glorification of the Resistance movement, denial of Vichy, and a reticence regarding the Holocaust experience.

For the thousands of individuals who immigrated to France following their liberation from concentration camps throughout Europe, adjustment was made even more difficult because of this Gaullist mindset. The recovery process was not quick, and it was not limited to a physical return to health; survivors found their emotional return to be the most difficult part of the recovery process. In order to come to terms with their feelings and memories, they needed to speak about them, but frequently, however, their French peers discouraged them from doing so.

This thesis explores the different ways that survivors adjusted to life in post-Vichy France, bearing with them their concentration camp memories. By closely analyzing the works of three individuals, Robert Antelme, Elie Wiesel, and Charlotte Delbo, this paper discusses the ways in which survivors dealt with the memory of their experiences in the months and years following their return. Using writing as a form of communication, they conveyed their stories in order to come to terms with their experiences, and to illustrate the role the Holocaust came play in the remainder of their lives. By reading their works, people who were not imprisoned can gain an understanding of life during and after the Holocaust, and can come to see the parallels in their own traumas and recoveries as part of the universality of human experience.

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Introduction

Based on first appearances, Elie Wiesel's *Night* captures the essence of the Holocaust in its slim 115 pages. It introduces the daily life of a Jewish family in Eastern Europe in the middle of World War II, and it contains the three parts that make up the essence of Holocaust literature: deportation, internment, and liberation. In its eloquent simplicity, it recounts the horror and inhumanity of the concentration camp experience, mixing the right amount of terror, honesty and poignancy to create one of the most famous pieces of World War II literature. For many readers, late-Twentieth century students who are exposed to the horrors of the Holocaust only through the textbooks and narratives of their grade school curriculums, these three elements appear to encapsulate wholly the Holocaust experience, as if it were an open and shut case. The time before the Holocaust may be discussed, but the time after rarely is. Survivors' reactions, and events that result from the Holocaust and the survivors' return at the end of the war, are rarely encountered by most readers. Therefore, based on the attention given in the history books of our youths, the impact of the Holocaust experience on the thousands who lived through it appears to have been small.

Yet the vast amount of attention we pay to it today reveals that the Holocaust continues to be an event of major significance. Because it was an event that was so outside of ordinary human experience, the transition from it to normal society must have created interesting and unique situations. What became of all the survivors? Logically, they must have regained a healthy body weight and readjusted to Western capitalist

culture. Many of them got jobs, collected possessions, and carried on their lives much like the civilians who had not been through the concentration camps. Yet the survivors had indeed been in the camps, and that experience must have had a lasting effect. Surely those who survived were unable to continue with their lives as if the concentration camps were nothing but a detoured trip on a train or a difficult period at work; the Holocaust was not a minor event that could be forgotten with a change of clothes and a good night's sleep.

Whether it be the fact that time has dulled the shock of the experience, or the knowledge that the entire group of first-generation survivors is growing smaller by the year, contemporary society has become fascinated by the Holocaust. The story of survival and horror is one that has gotten a lot of attention in recent literature and film; survivors and their stories are valued in a very different light than they were following their return. In these films and books, attention has been focused completely on the survivor, who is often seen as the sole person affected by the experience. Yet despite what the history lessons of our youth may have taught, the Holocaust and the events that resulted from it had a tremendous impact on the lives of all those they touched. In addition to the survivors, whose lives continued after their liberation, their families and friends also had to live with their own Holocaust experience: the separation, the return and readjustment process of their loved ones from the camps.

In France, a country that attempted to create a collaborationist relationship with Germany to set herself in a strong position following an Axis victory, memory of the Holocaust is especially delicate. Moving beyond these events, and others resulting from

the Vichy regime, proved difficult, if not impossible for the country as a whole.

Therefore, the healing process for survivors who came to France was made still more difficult by this unique social and political setting.

Analyst Lawrence Langer sums up the significance of the “after” in the Holocaust experience: “Asked to describe how he felt at the moment of liberation, one survivor declared: ‘Then I knew my troubles were really about to begin’” (qtd. in Langer “Interpreting” 37-8). Beginning with a close look at the unique French role in World War II, we will examine details about the return to France and the physical and social adjustment of those individuals who came to France for refuge. Additionally, we will look at the mental and emotional healing process, noting the range of reactions that occurred for numerous survivors in an effort to understand how this adjustment process was just as difficult as, and at times even more than, the concentration camp experience. As writing is frequently seen as a therapy because it enables communication, the postwar writings of several individuals will be examined closely in an effort to note the different ways that people view traumatic events, communicate these experiences, and work beyond them. In a society whose memories of the Holocaust are over half a century old, writings about these events may not seem relevant, but discussion of memory and its effect on the healing process will show how future generations, with little exposure to the Holocaust, can learn from it.

Vichy France

The War in France

For France, the war started just as it did for the rest of the world, on September 1, 1939 with the German invasion of Poland. On September 3, in reaction to this invasion, France declared war on Germany. After this first invasion, Hitler's government continued its quest of European dominance by extending its power northward over Denmark, Norway, the Baltic states, and westward to the countries of the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Belgium. France was the next target. The German invasion was first felt in France in May 1940, and six weeks of battle punctuated with a strategic move around the Maginot lines through the Ardennes forest led the way to an unguarded Paris on June 14. Seizure of the nation's capital guaranteed victory over the entire country, and soon after, on June 22, an armistice was signed that gave the Nazi army control of the northern three-fifths of the country (Figure 1).

This occupation brought an end to a growing French malaise that had existed for many decades, beginning with the 1870 defeat of Napoleon III in the Franco-Prussian war. During the 1800s, France was one of the major powers in Europe as a result of Napoleon I's and Napoleon III's attempts to conquer; however, this final defeat set off a chain of political failures that would help earn France its reputation as the "sick man of Europe" (Karnow 296). Beginning with the defeat of Napoleon III, France had been handed a loss in most of the major international wars. The most recent, World War I, "had made France a nation of old people and cripples" (Paxton 12), and its citizens were afraid that another war would destroy the population. Germany had already displayed its

strength in conquering numerous countries, and the French defeatist attitude helped give credibility to a German-led new European order (McNeill 2). The common French attitude regarding this was, “We’ll be lucky if anything more than the word ‘merde’ survives us” (qtd. in Paxton 12). The final goal of Germany in the west was a victory over Britain, but an important intermediate step was France, and the country played right into German hands by not putting up a fight when German tanks finally turned their focus towards her capital.

Although Nazi and Axis forces overtook numerous countries, the French experience is unique because geographically it was not completely occupied, unlike the others that fell under German control. Before signing the Armistice, the framework for a new government was planned in Bordeaux on June 17, 1940, that gave Marshal Philippe Pétain complete power to create a cabinet and govern all of Free France. With this, the Third Republic was dead. The government that would take its place would come to be referred to not by the name Pétain gave it, *l’État Français* (The French State), but by the mountainous spa town where it was drawn up, Vichy. Chosen because the former capital of Paris was now in the occupied zone, and because it was one of the few places in Free France that had enough hotel rooms, it would soon become infamous because of the collaborationist schemes of Pétain, his premier, Pierre Laval, and their cabinet, including the first head of the agency for Jewish affairs, the Commissariat Générale aux Questions Juives, Xavier Vallat. Much like the natural spring that rises there, to which numerous countrymen go for the rejuvenating effect of its waters, Vichy can be seen as the wellspring of a new French mentality, born in the midst of another world war. For those

who helped create it, the same people who would later go on to deny or downplay it, this mentality would engender a new government whose strength would rival that of the celebrated Louis XIV (Paxton 20) and would be a powerful force in what would become a German-led Europe.

The French were quick to see the strength of the German army, and Pétain's leadership and "foresight" made them certain that Nazism would be spread all over Europe soon after the hoped-for defeat of Britain. The best way to be in good standing for the future would be to create a collaborationist relationship with Germany now, and almost immediately after Pétain came into power, he worked to add elements of collaborationism to the Vichy framework. "Comparisons with other occupied countries in Europe underline the specificity of the French experience" (McNeill 6), for countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia adopted a dissimilarly passive role, and Switzerland remained neutral. At first, Nazi Germany was reluctant, for it "had no real interest in helping establish a sympathetic ally or even an independent fascist state in France. In its relationship with France, all other concerns were subordinate to the realization of its own agenda" (McNeill 3). It was the continued efforts of Laval, the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Nazi-Vichy liaison in Paris (Paxton 63-4) that finally led the Germans to accept the "collaboration", for the sake of French well-being, and for France's own profit.

Yet calling the relationship between France and Germany collaborationist is a misnomer. Being an occupied country, France was required to follow German commands and had very little say in the way of protest. Germany received benefits from

this relationship, mainly additional economic, military, and social resources.

Economically, Germany used French resources for the fight against the Allies, which included conscripting young French men and women to Germany as a part of *le Service du travail obligatoire (STO)* (McNeill 4). Although the French had a weak mental outlook, their army was actually quite strong, and Pétain offered the Germans military support in Europe as well as in Africa. Some elements of the collaboration were purely French contributions, such as Joseph Darnand's 1943 creation of a militia called the *Milice*. This organization was formed by turning, "the old paramilitary arm of the Veterans' Legion...into a national parapolice force of volunteers against the Resistance" (Paxton 298), who were referred to by some as "terrorists" (Wright 395). Socially, individuals were encouraged to turn in Resistance fighters, as well as any Jews, and collaborationist magazines such as *Je Suis Partout* and *La République* (Paxton 58) were widespread. Besides Italy, which participated in Jewish deportations only after it was taken over by Germany in 1943, France distinguished itself by being, "the only country besides Bulgaria to hand Jews over from its own territory" (Nossiter 103), an act that would bring a strong feeling of guilt after the war. Because the Vichy regime was strongly anti-Semitic, German efforts at Jewish deportation were helped greatly by the *Milice*. A notorious night at the Vélodrome D'Hiver sports stadium in Paris remains the central event of deportation when over 12,000 non-French Jews were gathered in the arena for several days before being deported to Drancy and Auschwitz (Gildea 67) in mid-July 1942. Although it seemed a good idea to collaborate when Germany was strong and seemed on the verge of continental dominance, the defeat of Nazi Germany and the

end of the war would leave France in a major predicament, when she would have to face the possibility of guilt for fascist collaboration.

The Ideas and Ideals of Resistance

As can be expected, the collaborationist philosophy was not welcomed with open arms by all of France. Although it started small as a “clandestine movement...within France” (Gildea 58), it was the Free French forces, led by general Charles de Gaulle in Algeria, that eventually brought the term “Resistance” into the national spotlight. “There was simply no significant organized domestic alternative to Pétain for most of 1940” (Paxton 41), but several political incidents in 1941 brought about growing discontent, and the complete occupation of France in 1942 created widespread concern and helped de Gaulle gain a notable following. Throughout the war the Resistance took several forms: in Paris right-wing groups such as Défense de la France, Libération Nord, and Organisation Civile et Militaire, looked to exploit collaborationist officials—both French and German—and to help France remain independent. In the country, resistance fighters like the young and rebellious *maquis* took more violent actions; these groups of men lived in the mountains and committed acts of guerrilla warfare (Paxton 292-3). This violence was never fully supported by de Gaulle, and represents one of the major factors that prevented the Resistance from gaining a stronger hold. Discord that was present between different groups, even with the Free France forces (Wright 397), kept them from uniting, for each had its own definition and interpretation of resistance. The romantic idea of *la Résistance* would play a significant ideological role during the political and

social reconstruction of the late 1940s, but it was much larger in spirit following the war than it actually was during it.

Life in Vichy France

The Resistance never gained a particularly strong hold on the adult French population, with the total active participation hovering somewhere around two percent (Paxton 295). Most French citizens were content with the Vichy legislation. In fact, the majority of the people wanted their lives to continue much as they had before the Armistice was signed. Therefore, social change to accommodate the political one in Vichy France did not occur quickly. At the beginning of the long and winding Vichy tale, there were few noticeable differences in the rights of non-Jews, as Frenchmen tried to neutralize the disruption that had been the Armistice and continue on with their lives. Political freedoms such as elections were sacrificed for the greater good of future generations; however, in the coming years, changes on the political landscape and the war front would force more changes upon the French people. Citizens were eventually subject to rationing, food shortages, air raids, and blackouts as resources became scarce and fighting continued in France for German control of Britain.

In addition to all these aforementioned changes, French Jews also faced further restrictions. As Jews in Eastern Europe were being sent (unbeknownst) to concentration camps in Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia, Jews in France began to feel the strain of Nazism. Laws restricted their rights to move freely throughout society, property was confiscated without proper explanation, and the 1940 *Statut des Juifs* placed limits on

their social rights (Weinberg 10). Marriage between Jews and non-Jews was forbidden, schools were rid of Jewish students and teachers, and curfews were put in place to constrict the comfort zone of Jews. They were forced to register with the government and mandated to wear a yellow star on their coats. *Rafles* (the raiding and rounding up of large groups) like the episode at the Vélodrome D'Hiver and deportations of the other countries were not far off. Any refusal of these regulations guaranteed death, and as a result, Jews began to make changes to their lives to help them blend better into Aryan society. Families near the eastern border of France, such as in the Alsace-Lorraine region, moved westward to cities such as Paris to avoid being singled out as Jews, as René Roth recounts in her memoir *Touch Wood*, and often settled in Jewish neighborhoods near the Rue du Clignancourt in the 16th *arrondissement* (district).

Life After Vichy

After four long years of struggle, acquiescence, and German control, liberation was made possible as a result of the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. By this time, de Gaulle had created as strong a following in France as had Pétain, and Frenchmen looked to him to lead after the war. Although it had been the Allies who fought the Germans off French soil, paving the way for liberation, de Gaulle persuaded U.S. General Eisenhower that the French should play a key role in expelling German occupiers from Paris and “strike down” the Milice (Kaplan 60) to show France, as well as the rest of the world, the strength of its national unity. Following the Liberation, however, de Gaulle glossed over these truths with words that were more flattering to his home country. He presented the belief that “Eternal France” had set herself free because of her sheer

greatness and innate strength, without help from the Allies. “...Paris liberated!” (qtd. in Roussio 16) he proclaimed at the Hôtel de Ville on August 25, 1944. “Liberated by itself, by its own people with the help of the armies of France, with the support and aid of France as a whole, of fighting France, of the only France, of the true France, of eternal France”¹ (*ibid*). The French took his words to heart, and in 1983 they still ranked the Liberation as the single most important event of the last forty years (Roussio 15). They looked forward to a future full of idealism and French prosperity, but these ideals proved to be, as the saying goes, more easily said than done.

The French reconstruction following Liberation illustrated just how long and arduous the process can be, with numerous temporary policies and transitory governments that slowly led to a stable governing body. The first of several formal ruling entities following the Occupation was not voted into place until October 1946 (Wright 404), two years after Liberation. In the interim of Liberation and the adoption of the constitution of the Fourth Republic, de Gaulle took command of a provisional government that tried to embrace ideals of the Resistance that never concretely existed in any uniform or national form. This alleged national resistance would only segregate the country into even more factions, and would shift its mood within two years from “passionate idealism and hope to skeptical cynicism and indifference” (Wright 409). Although the French people knew the history he was telling was not accurate, no one had the courage to stand up and speak the truth. To speak the truth would be to remember Vichy, and to bring up the guilt of collaborationist and anti-Semitic activities. So no one

¹ “...Paris libéré! Libéré par lui-même, libéré par son peuple avec le concours des armées de la France, avec l'appui et le concours de la France tout entière, de la France qui se bat, de la seule France, de la vraie France, de la France éternelle.”

spoke up, and life slowly slipped back to the way it had been before the war, only this time with a dark grey cloud of the Nazi involvement hanging over the country as a reminder. This comforting need for familiarity and eagerness to forget the French State, presented itself in a Fourth Republic constitution that greatly resembled that of the Third Republic. “In the first postwar elections, the winners were largely the same men who had been politically prominent before the war, regardless of whether they had played an active role in opposing the Germans” (Rousso 19). The same desire for normality that the French people exuded around the Armistice of 1940 reappeared after the Liberation of 1944, and for the ordinary French citizen, Resistance fell into the same category of war taboos as the Holocaust and Vichy. France’s political problems were compounded by her economic and social ones, and her citizens turned to dealing with these issues to escape the frustrations of politics. Therefore, radical political change did not occur until 1958, when de Gaulle again appeared on the political scene, creating the Fifth Republic that is still in force today.

De Gaulle’s first stint as leader of France was short, lasting only sixteen months. However, the power of his influence can be measured not by the time he spent in office but by the ideas he promoted regarding the war while there. During this time, he propagated what French historian Henry Rousso has termed the “Vichy Syndrome,” the downplay and the outright denial of all events and attitudes related to Vichy and the collaboration. “Vichy was simply enclosed in parentheses” (Rousso 17), and the citizens of that small spa town in the Alps have in their own way, denied the past extremely well, to the point that today, Vichy’s youth do not even know the historical significance of

their town.² The same day that de Gaulle presented his symbolism of “eternal France,” Georges Bidault, chairman of the *Conseil National de la Résistance* (CNR), spoke in support of this idea when he said, “the Republic has never ceased to exist... Vichy was and is null and void” (qtd in Roussio 16). This dissemination began almost immediately following the Liberation, and its impact can be seen in the significance the French people continue to place on the Resistance and the Liberation, and in the lack of attention that is given to Vichy and the Occupation. Even today, French history books do not consider the *Etat Français* to be an official government.

The denial of the events at Vichy had a negative impact on the French population in that there was no unified national memory that developed surrounding the events of World War II. Holocaust survivors, and the families of survivors and victims, were discouraged from mourning during and following Repatriation. Instead, civilians were encouraged to embrace ideals of the Resistance that they may not have completely believed. The postwar French attitude of reticence can be attributed, at least partly, to the discouragement of citizens to speak about the horrific actions during World War II and the propagation of what Roussio calls the “Gaullist resistancialist myth” (18), that is, a strongly unified French resistance. Other peoples of the world may see this as a sign of guilt, but to the French, especially those who were raised in the generations following the War, keeping quiet is the only mode of proper behavior. As a result, those who died, both soldiers and civilians, were scarcely memorialized, and the truth about the French

² See Nossiter, pg 97-216

involvement in World War II remained a national “family secret” for many years, as unspoken as adultery.

Speaking about Vichy

The first major attempt at dealing with the memory and the “truths” that de Gaulle and his Free France entourage propagated, was the 1971 Marcel Ophüls film *La Chagrin et La Pitié*. This film was revolutionary in that it spoke, for the first time, of the guilt of Vichy and the political and social divisions that existed amongst the French people. Banned from TV exposure for over a decade, it was allowed in only one small theater in Paris upon its release and was not shown on national public television until 1981 (Nossiter 9). As of 1992, it was still unavailable on video in France (Nossiter 12). Yet even this film did not have a major effect of removing the blinders from the past that many French people were hoping for.

It was 1972 when Robert Paxton, a history professor at Columbia University, published *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944*, a book that reversed public sentiments regarding France’s role in World War II. Aided by the fact that he was publishing outside of France, he became the first person to finally “destroy myths that originated partly in the propaganda of Marshal Pétain’s Vichy regime, which, for the most part, the Gaullist government had seen advantageous to maintain” (Nossiter 9). He presented to the world, for the first time, the true collaborationist aims of the French relationship with Germany. He spoke of a French-initiated collaborationist scheme, not German-led, as the world had been made to believe, and he defined the long-term goals

of the Vichy government. His book became almost biblical for the French people who had been waiting for the truth to be told. At a symposium held in his honor, Rousso called Paxton “a site of memory...His word has served as a kind of gospel for an entire generation” (Nossiter 12). The truths that Paxton printed were realities that Frenchmen knew but the rest of the world did not. What is significant here is not that France was guilty of collaboration or that Paxton wrote a book about this collaboration, but that it

Post-Vichy France

Refuge and Repatriation

Thomas Jefferson once said, “Ask the traveled inhabitant of any nation, in what country on earth would you rather live? Certainly in my own...Which would be your second choice? France” (qtd. in Nossiter). France has long charmed peoples of the world with its foundations in fine dining and fashion, and its images of *la belle époque* at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet for those seeking refuge, France has held another allure: her reputation for hospitality. The months that followed the liberation of European countries from Nazism validated this reputation, as thousands of war survivors emigrated to France. Strict immigration laws in democratic Allied countries like Britain and the United States made France all the more alluring. However, the attitudes that developed as a result of the Liberation and the purge of Vichy changed this innate acceptance, and created an unwelcoming environment for the many displaced persons who came seeking refuge.

Liberation of concentration camps began in late 1944, and for many survivors, France was, if not a final destination, a temporary waystation to a new life in the United

States or Palestine (Weinberg 16). They started coming to Paris in April 1945 to have their stories documented and head counts taken, and eventually, over 40,000 non-French displaced Jews, and thousands of others of differing nationalities, came to France (Weinberg 16). In all, these refugees included Jewish and non-Jewish concentration camp survivors, political prisoners of war, STO workers, and soldiers. Beginning plans

placed the Orsay train station as the center for this activity, but, “when the Gare d’Orsay was suggested as a place to receive the survivors, no thought was given to their condition. It was assumed that after completing the necessary formalities, they would be able to return home and resume a normal life...” (qtd. in Roussio 25-6). No one expected the camp survivors to be in any different condition from prisoners of war. Long-term shelter had to be organized at the Hôtel Lutétia when the physical and emotional state of the survivors was comprehended, and this unexpectedness, instead of being viewed as a tragedy, was considered a nuisance for French organizers. “Why, some of them are even disfigured. Their complaints are tiresome for those whose only wish is to return as quickly as possible to peace and quiet” (qtd. in Roussio 26). Others came to the Orsay station for the entertainment of seeing the reunions of long-separated loved ones, as if they did not consider survival, and what had occurred in the camps, as anything significant.

Lots of people who are not waiting for anyone come to the Gare d’Orsay, too, just to see the show, the arrival of the prisoners of war and how the women wait for them, and all the rest...You can tell the spectators from the others because they don’t shout out, and they stand some way away from the crowds of women so as to see both the arrival of the prisoners and the way the women greet them.³ (Duras, *The War* 16)

Historian David Weinberg affirms the belief that most Frenchmen shared the views of French immigration organizers and longed to return to their normal lives, particularly if they had no connection to the survivors or immigrants. However, their desires were

³ “Beaucoup de gens qui n’attendent personne viennent aussi à la gare d’Orsay pour voir le spectacle, l’arrivée des prisonniers de la guerre et la façon dont les femmes les attendent, et tout le reste...On distingue les spectateurs des autres au fait qu’ils ne crient pas et qu’ils se tiennent un peu à l’écart des masses des femmes pour pouvoir voir à la fois l’arrivée des prisonniers et l’accueil que leur font des femmes” (Duras, *La douleur* 26).

delayed by the survivors' psychological need to come to terms with their experiences and regain control of their emotions.

The home of the famed Declaration of the Rights of Man seemed to have changed its position on humanity with the passage of time, for the persons who journeyed to France found that their human freedoms were restricted in this war-wrecked nation. The normally humane French abandoned their usual disposition for a stricter attitude so that a singular national restructuring could take precedence over a myriad of personal reclamations. Laws such as the banning of striped camp uniforms from official commemorations were enacted to enable French citizens to continue their lives and not wallow in the sorrow and guilt of the war. This also helped them avoid remembering nights such as the Vélodrome D'Hiver. It soon became taboo to discuss concentration camps and their survivors in French society. Emotionally, the wartime French government had a permanent impact on its citizens, especially those in Vichy, and there was a mutual desire to minimize the memory of what had occurred there. Following the war, local newspapers solicited new names for the town (Nossiter 101) and hotels that had housed federal departments changed their names. The spas were rarely frequented, and Vichy became practically a ghost town. Decades later, in the late 1990s, in an attempt to separate the governmental doings in Vichy from the town itself, M. Charasse in the Assemblée Nationale in Paris supported a bill to ban mention of "Vichy" from all official references to the État Français, with the reasoning that, "it's time to put an end to a mix-up that is absolutely appalling" (Nossiter 219).

For those who were returning, however, the greatest importance was not the political situation of the government, but their own immediate physical and emotional caretaking. Yet the care was not uniform. Refugees who came to France did not find themselves on an equal playing field; there even existed a caste system between those who had survived. As is the case in normal society, prejudices and hierarchies existed between the different types of deportees:

The volunteer resistance fighter did not wish to be confused with the “racial” deportee; the deportee did not wish to be mistaken for a prisoner of war; the prisoner of war was careful to distinguish himself from the “*déporté du travail*”, the laborer “deported” to work in Germany for the Reich. (Rousso 24)

In a hospitable country, prejudices like that do not exist, but France had become, as a result of the war, not the same hospitable country that she once had been.

In allegiance to the “resistancialist myth”, those who had been arrested by the Milice or the Gestapo for their roles as Resistance fighters were glorified following the war. By the same token, a great effort was made to diminish the Jewish role in the deportations as an effort to minimize guilt; memorials allude not to the deportation of French Jews but instead to the ambiguous “martyrs of deportation”, as the crypt on the Île de la cité in Paris remembers them. The Commissariat Générale aux Questions Juives was all but forgotten in Vichy, as well as elsewhere in France, when the agency’s home, the Algeria Hotel, was renamed le Carnot. “It was not until the 1970s that the message about Vichy and the persecutions of the Jews began to be established” (Gildea 67), but at the same time there grew an entirely new view regarding the Holocaust: *le négationnisme*, or denial. Historians such as Robert Faurisson and concentration camp

survivor Paul Rassinier stand out as the fathers of this denial, fostering in others a denial of the existence of gas chambers and an organized Nazi plan for Jewish genocide, or in more extreme cases denial of the entire Holocaust. For the most part, their ideas were extreme, but their statements played a role in diminishing perceived Jewish participation, and they lessened the significance and power of the survivors' stories.

Whether they were returning to France as citizens, or journeying there as immigrants, camp survivors needed help to regain an economic and social hold on life. Health needed to be reclaimed, citizenship needed to be established, and employment needed to be gained for most of the people coming to France. Due to the pressures discussed above, the immigrants quickly found they could not do it alone. Communist, socialist and other bureaucratic groups like the *Mouvement national des prisonniers de guerre et déportés*⁴ (MNP GD) made it their goal to bring together prisoners of war, the deported, and STO workers (Gildea 67). Depending on the type of prisoner, each experience was quite different upon arrival in France.

For French Jewish survivors who after the war had no surviving families to which they could return, the readjustment was greater, and a strong community was created between these individuals and those non-French Jewish refugees who came seeking the welcoming reputation of France. For this newly reconstituted Jewish community, there were three major issues related to the war (Weinberg 16). First, the process that would prove to take the longest time was the restitution of property taken during the riots and deportations. The strong anti-Semitism that still existed in France was a roadblock in the

⁴ National Movement of Prisoners of War and Deportees

repossession of property, and abandoned property laws and laws requiring reimbursements, as well as crooked politicians, made this even more difficult. In most cases, Jewish citizens faced great difficulty in the reclamation process because of biased laws enacted by the French government. By 1946, French law restricted the restitution of property to dispossessed individuals, and, “as late as 1951 only half of the 65,000 Parisian Jews whose homes had been ransacked or sold during the Occupation had been able to reacquire property” (Weinberg 16). The unified French desire to turn one’s back on the past guaranteed that the atrocities of the Holocaust would not play a major part in arousing sympathy for reclaiming Jews, and the presence of anti-Semitism in the French government made it difficult for Jewish citizens to find bureaucratic support for their establishment efforts.

Another issue that the Jewish community faced was nursing the refugees back to health. The French Jewish community, and groups such as the American Joint Distribution Committee and the *Comité juif d’action sociale et de reconstruction* (COJASOR) helped approximately 75 percent of survivors who came to France get housing and food (Weinberg 17), regardless of the religious affiliation of the survivor. Another part of the repatriation process was finding a suitable job. The industrialization during the war helped make this process easier. The Organization for the Rehabilitation Through Training helped refugees get government accreditation and subsidization for vocational programs for both unskilled and semi-skilled workers in French industry (Weinberg 17).

The final problem of the French Jewish community following the war was discovering the whereabouts of children who had been orphaned and adopted as a result of the conflict (Weinberg 16). Between five and fifteen thousand French Jewish children had been orphaned or abandoned during the war (Weinberg 17), sent, for the duration of the war, to live with either non-Jewish families, or in boarding schools such as the le petit college St Jean de la Croix in *Au revoir les enfant* or the makeshift Chateau Chabannes in the Creuse countryside. Countries throughout Europe participated in the orphanage of their Jewish youth; examples of this are documented in the films *Into the Arms of Strangers: Children of the Kindertransport* and *Children of the Chabannes*. Following the war, efforts were made to return these children to their original Jewish families whenever possible. There were several problems that arose as a result of this temporary guardianship, one being the baptism of the Jewish children for either foster family religious reasons or as a means to hide them better. For children who had been removed from their families at a young age, returning to their birth parents meant returning to people and a life they no longer knew, and as a result, families were reunited as complete strangers. In all, the chances of recovering Jewish children that had been adopted by non-Jews was difficult, and was made even more so by the 1953 Finaly Affair. In this case, the Catholic Church blocked children from returning to their Jewish families (Weinberg 17). There were also hundreds of Jewish children whose parents had been lost to the Holocaust, and hundreds of survivors, such as Elie Wiesel, who were still children themselves; approximately 100 “institutions” were created for their care and reintegration into the community (Weinberg 17).

In most cases, the non-Jewish survivors were political prisoners during the war, frequently members of the Resistance, and frequently they left families behind. For these individuals, the repossession of property was not a major issue, especially if they had family who had not been interned. For all those who left loved ones behind, the reestablishment of relationships was a crucial element of their future survival after their return from the camps. For those who also faced other prejudices upon their return, readjustment became a very difficult, if not impossible, process. Regardless of the background of the individual, many survivors and entire communities that sheltered survivors, discovered that in many ways the return to social normalcy would not be an easy or a quick process, just as the political process was turning out to be for France as a whole.

Physical and Emotional Adjustment

More difficult than finding employment or gathering possessions was the psychological and physical healing process that the survivors faced. The Holocaust experience had left each survivor with a different level of mental health and clarity, and therefore, each adaptation story is different. Depending on their country of origin, their surviving family members, their physical health, and the amount of support available to them, the survivors' adjustments to life in France were as varied as the details of their internment.

Initially upon their return, many survivors were very ill and often were not expected to live; loss of weight, malnutrition, and fatigue had left many on the verge of

death. This exhaustion was common among survivors, and many wondered if they would ever feel rested again. Additionally, many had left camps such as Dachau that had been quarantined for typhus, and as a result they bore the effects of the disease. Others became ill with fever only upon their return, as their bodies learned to readjust to the sudden presence of warmth, comfort, and nourishment. Survivors such as Robert Antelme suffered from dysentery when he began eating again, because his stomach wasn't used to food. His family had heard that, "There have been accidents in Paris already from letting deportees eat too soon after they got back from the camps"⁵ (Duras, *The War* 55), and they were afraid the same would happen to him if they let him eat how he wanted. Instead, Robert and many others had to wait for a doctor's approval before they could begin eating again, and even then there was a strict methodical process to follow to ensure health.

For many survivors, the physical return to health was the most pressing issue on their minds following their return. After this fear of death had passed, however, focus turned to how they would recover emotionally and reenter normal society. The shock of returning left many feeling as one survivor did when she said, "The truth of the matter is I felt nothing, did not feel myself existing, did not exist"⁶ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 236). Yet the survivors did exist, and part of their struggle in daily life was acknowledging and accepting this. Some feared they would not remember how to live, doubting themselves and feeling overwhelmed by change. The sudden shift of reality left many feeling like

⁵ "il y a déjà eu des accidents dans Paris à trop vite faire manger les déportés au retour des camps" (Duras, *La douleur* 70)

⁶ "je ne sentais rien, je ne me sentais pas exister, je n'existais pas" (Delbo, *Mesure* 12)

Charlotte Delbo did when she said, “Walk, speak, answer questions, state where you want to go, go there. I had forgotten all this. Had I ever known it? I had no idea what to do and where to begin. The whole project was beyond me”⁷ (*Auschwitz* 236). Feeling so overwhelmed, survivors and their families soon realized how long the adjustment process would take.

Redeveloping an understanding for daily life was a slow progression, filled with many gains and setbacks. As one survivor explained, the readjustment process was like being born again and having to learn basic skills as if for the first time:

I can’t tell you how he did it: he put me back in this life without my even noticing it. ‘It’s like teaching children to speak’, he said to me once. ‘You speak, you show them how to move their lips, they imitate you, and one day they’re talking.’⁸ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 281)

Others concur that the adjustment to daily life, the return of skills and faculties, was a slow step-by-step process. “It was all by itself...that reality resumed its contours, colors, significance, but ever so slowly...Gradually, I recovered my senses of sight and hearing. Gradually, began to recognize colors, sounds, smells”⁹ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 238). Even more difficult was the abstract redevelopment of a sense of ownership, because in the camps they had possessed nothing, not even a name. As Delbo explained, it was a long

⁷ “Marcher, parler, répondre aux questions, dire où l’on veut aller, y aller. J’avais oublié. L’avais-je jamais su? Je voyais ni comment m’y prendre ni par où commencer. L’entreprise était hors de mes forces” (Delbo, *Mesure* 11)

⁸ “Je ne peux pas t’expliquer comment il s’y est pris: il [son mari] m’a remise dans la vie sans que je m’en aperçoive. ‘Comme lorsqu’on apprend à parler aux enfants’, m’a-t-il dit une fois. ‘On leur parle, on leur montre comment on bouge les lèvres, ils vous imitent et un beau jour ils parlent’” (Delbo, *Mesure* 87)

⁹ “C’est d’elle-même...que la réalité a repris ses contours, ses couleurs, ses significations, mais si lentement...Petit à petit, je reconnaissais la vue, l’ouïe. Petit à petit, je reconnaissais les couleurs, les sons, les odeurs” (Delbo, *Mesure* 15)

time before she could understand that the books on her bedside table were actually books and that they were meant for her to read whenever she chose (*Auschwitz* 14).

As important to survivors as the redevelopment of basic life skills, was understanding the difference between life before and after internment. Many months and years had been spent awaiting the return to reality, and in an effort to escape the horrors of the camps, many survivors imaged what life would be like when they were liberated: “The life we wanted to find again when we used to say, ‘If I return...’ was to be large majestic, flavorful”¹⁰ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 262). Instead, they found that the reality that awaited them was not as grand and golden as they were expecting; it was in fact, life, with the same qualities of excitement and disappointment that it had possessed before the war. They also found that the troubles and unanswerable questions that had plagued them in the camp had in fact followed them into the civilized world and had materialized in unexpected ways. Mainly, the survivors were forced to deal with the unconscious change that forced internment had imposed upon their psyches. Delbo questions, “How could I reaccustom myself to a self which had become so detached from me I was not sure I ever existed? My former life? Had I had a former life? Was I alive to have an afterwards, to know what afterwards meant?”¹¹ (*Auschwitz* 237). They found that after their experiences, they were no longer the individuals who they had been before, and this had an effect on their relationships and their opinion of themselves. Coming to this realization in a society as socially restive as France was at the time of reconstruction,

¹⁰ “La vie que nous voulions retrouver quand nous disions: ‘Si je rentre...’ devait être grande, majestueuse, savoureuse” (Delbo, *Mesure* 59)

¹¹ “Comment me rehabituer à un moi qui s’était si bien détaché que je n’étais pas sûre qu’il eût jamais existé? Ma vie d’avant? Avais-je eu une vie avant? Ma vie d’après? Etais-je vivante pour avoir un après, pour savoir ce que c’est qu’après?” (Delbo, *Mesure* 14)

when society was downplaying and recreating the “truths” about their Holocaust experiences, made this all the more difficult. As a result of this mental shift, the lives of survivors were affected by a complex temporality: the before, the during, and the after of the internment experience. For many individuals, the interplay of these three periods influenced their outlook for the remainder of their lives.

For some survivors, this dreadful experience and the ensuing mental ramifications were more than they could bear, and they were unable to adjust to normal life. At varying levels, the pain of memory prevented some survivors from redeveloping senses of self, health, and a basis in reality that would enable them to enjoy life again. The readjustment stories of a handful of individuals were documented and published in a collection by Charlotte Delbo called *The Measure of Our Days*¹², which effectively illustrates a wide variety of the reactions that resulted for survivors adjusting to life in France. Through these stories, Delbo illustrates the return to lives of love, pain, and acceptance after the Holocaust experience, lives that keep the Holocaust at the forefront of memory.

The psychological displacement that occurred after internment left some survivors unable to recover enough to reenter normal society. One such individual is Gaby, who is unable to leave her house because she is constantly and inexplicably cold, forcing her husband to do the shopping and ordering clothes only from catalogs (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 170). For some reason, the coldness she felt in the camps continues to haunt her, regardless of the number of years that pass. Some survivors dealt with chronic

¹² *Mesure de nos jours*

nightmares or frequent maladies like Gaby's upon their return, and many, like Jacques, were committed to mental institutions. Louise was married to another survivor following their liberation, and, "After twenty years of marriage there's only one deportee in this couple. He's the deportee...He was deported so he's frail, sick, nervous, sensitive to the cold"¹³ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 332). Because of his constant illnesses, she was forced to readjust and become healthy and emotionally strong in order not only to take care of herself, but also her husband, because, "He's the only one who's entitled to getting ill. At any rate, we couldn't both be sick at the same time"¹⁴ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 332). In an extreme case, another individual has been so traumatized by her experience that several decades later, she speaks of how, "As for me, I remember nothing...Actually, I remember nothing. When people ask me something about over there [the camps], I feel a kind of void opening before me"¹⁵ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 344).

Yet there were also those who were able to minimize the afterlife of their experiences and move beyond them. This process was slow and occurred to a different extent for each individual, but over time these memories played an even more minor role in a survivor's mental outlook. In this adjustment process, many survivors found that, "it was not easy to shed certain habits, certain fears. We had not yet forgotten the camp rules" (Wiesel, *Rivers* 110). These habits were general and all-consuming, or as minor a detail as their personal daily habits. For the first time in a long time, there was no officer

¹³ "Après vingt ans de mariage, il n'y a plus qu'un déporté dans le ménage. Le déporté, c'est lui...Il a été déporté, il est fragile, il est malade, il est nerveux, il est frileux" (Delbo, *Mesure* 176)

¹⁴ "Il n'y a qui ait le droit d'être malade. De toute façon, nous ne pourrions pas être malades tous les deux en mêmes temps" (Delbo, *Mesure* 177)

¹⁵ "Moi, je me ne souviens de rien...Je me ne souviens vraiment de rien. Quand on me demande quelque chose de là-bas, je sens une espèce de vide béant devant moi" (Delbo, *Mesure* 197-8)

commanding them to do certain tasks; they could move about their environment as they pleased. Survivors also had to redevelop an understanding of privacy, for this was something they had lacked completely in the camps.

They also had to adjust the presence of food, and having the ability to choose when and what to eat; several survivors speak of hoarding food in case they were refused it later on. While under the protection of a children's refugee organization, survivor Elie Wiesel speaks of how, "We didn't finish everything on our plates, instead we would save something for later, hiding a crust of bread or a piece of cake, just in case" (*Rivers* 110). The husband of one Auschwitz survivor, Marie-Louise, said, "when I saw her pick up wilted cabbage leaves which had fallen out of a vegetable hamper at the greengrocer's. I began to doubt she'd ever be normal"¹⁶ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 282). Because both these individuals were in safe and nurturing environments, they quickly developed the trust that food would be waiting for them whenever they needed it, and these habits, as well as other peculiarities they had developed through their internment, did not last long. Over time, survivors found that they were able to shake the habits from their subconscious enough to carry on in normal society, seemingly unaffected.

The helpfulness and support of friends and family seemed to have a large impact on the mental clarity of survivors and their ability to move beyond their camp experiences and regain happiness in their lives, as well as the ability and willingness of survivors to communicate their experiences. In the case of Marie-Louise, her husband's continual support and dedication to her recovery enabled her to regain a completely

¹⁶ "quand je l'ai vue ramasser des feuilles de choux jaunies qui étaient tombées d'un cageot, chez le marchand de légumes. je me suis demandé si elle redeviendrait une personne normale" (Delbo, *Mesure* 89)

normal life. “Thanks to Pierre. If he hadn’t been here to help me, I couldn’t have made the adjustment. With him by my side it was smooth sailing”¹⁷ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 280). Although he was not sent to a camp, he learned all about his wife’s experiences from her talking about them, and for both of them, the Auschwitz experience was a shared memory that has brought them closer together, like their marriage. Marie-Louise found a healthy outlet for her feelings and emotions through her husband, later her children, and also through writing about her experiences.

The experience of Marie-Louise was an anomaly, because frequently survivors had a very difficult time finding words to express what they had been through. More often they were like Mado, an individual who stands out as the one who has the most difficulty communicating her experiences. Another camp survivor, she was never able to escape the guilt of having survived when her comrades around her perished. Even though almost two decades had passed between Mado’s liberation and the writing of her essay on her recuperation, the memories of her fellow prisoners remained so strong that she could not forget them. “Our loyalty to the comrades we left back there is all we have” (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 266), she said. “In any event, forgetting is out of the question”¹⁸ (*ibid*). Therefore, every major event in her life carries with it the weight of the memory of these women. When Mado was married, she did it consciously thinking of all the women who would never be married. At the birth of her son, the overwhelming joy she

¹⁷ “Grace à Pierre. S’il n’avait pas été là pour m’aider, je n’aurais jamais pu me réadapter. Avec lui, je n’avais pas de difficultés” (Delbo, *Mesure* 86)

¹⁸ “Etre fidèle aux camarades que nous avons laissées là-bas, c’est tout ce qui nous reste. Oublier est impossible de toute manière” (Delbo, *Mesure* 64)

felt was at the same time bitter because the memory of the other camp women came back to her. She said,

My room was invaded by the ghosts of the companions. The ghost of Mounette was saying, 'Mounette died without ever knowing this joy.'...These were the ghosts of...all the young women who died without knowing what it meant to be suffused by this joy. The silky water of my joy changed to sticky mud, sooty snow, fetid marshes.¹⁹ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 261)

With the memory of these comrades with her always, she has a lot of trouble transmitting them and the rest of her experiences into words to share with her husband. Instead, she resolves that those around her will never understand, stops trying to help them understand, and is therefore never able to regain a hold on reality.

Robert Antelme was another individual who was undoubtedly changed by his camp experiences. Whereas before the war he would have normally played on the beach with his friends, afterwards he lacked any desire to share in the seaside delight, and can only watch from a blanket. His wife notices this change in him, saying, "It's in that silence that the war's still there, flowing across the sand and through the wind"²⁰ (Duras, *The War* 67). Undoubtedly there were others like Mado and Antelme who were unable to forget not only their own camp experiences, but also the individuals they had encountered there, and who lived with these memories for the rest of their lives.

Regardless of the degree to which survivors were able to adapt to daily life and to keep their concentration camp memories from controlling their present, the past was

¹⁹ Ma chambre était envahie par les spectres de nos compagnes. Spectre de Mounette qui disait: 'Mounette est morte sans connaître cette joie'. Spectres de...toutes ces jeunes femmes qui sont mortes sans avoir connu cela, sans avoir été baignées de cette joie. L'eau soyeuse de ma joie s'est changé en boue gluante, en neige souillée, en marécage fétide. (Delbo, *Mesure* 55)

²⁰ "C'est dans ce silence-là que la guerre est encore présente, qu'elle sourd à travers le sable, le vent" (Duras, *La douleur* 83)

unavoidable. Many spoke of how, “their appearance is deceptive” (Wiesel, *Rivers* 273),
for although they l

Documentation of Experience

Writing as Reflection

Like Antelme, many other survivors spoke incessantly about their experiences soon after their return, in an attempt to explain them and understand them completely. For some, this type of communication was enough, but for others, like Antelme himself, another method was necessary. Many survivors attempted to find an audience and the right words to explain their experiences by committing their memories to paper. Unlike the spoken word, which is “distinguished by the absence of such literary meditation,” Langer has stated, “writing invites reflection, commentary, interpretation, by the author as well as the reader” (“Interpreting” 32). Some wrote for purely historical purposes, that is, the documentation of an experience, and others for more personal ones. “Afternoons I write” (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 279), Marie-Louise said. “Oh, I’m not a writer, don’t take myself for one... You must feel the same; we need to remember”²¹ (*ibid*). Like Marie-Louise, there were those who kept journals that they shared with no one or only a few close friends, while others, like Elie Wiesel, hoped his writing would reach the souls of thousands who would or could not speak for themselves.

Whatever the method of communication, or the intended audience, communicating is clearly very beneficial to those trying to get over a traumatic event; those survivors who chose to share their experiences were taking positive steps towards

²¹ “L’après-midi, j’écris. Oh! Je ne suis pas un écrivain, je ne me prends pas pour un écrivain...Mais, tu dois éprouver cela, toi aussi, on a besoin de se rappeler” (Delbo, *Mesure* 83)

readjusting themselves to normality. Psychoanalyst Dori Laub claims that in order for survivors to understand their experiences, they must recount them to someone else. “The listener to trauma...needs to know that the trauma survivor who is bearing witness has no prior knowledge, no comprehension and no memory of what happened” (Feldman and Laub 58). Only by having an active audience, he explains, can a survivor begin to understand the story they are telling, and fully experience it for the first time. Antelme affirms this statement in the foreword to his narrative, when he says, “No sooner would we begin to tell our story than we would be choking over it”²² (*The Human Race* 3). As painful a process as it may be, acknowledging their memories is helpful for many individuals who are attempting to understand their past in their attempt to move beyond it, or at least to come to peace with it.

When survivors began to document their stories, they had difficulty overcoming the inadequacies that arose when trying to translate their experiences and feelings into a written language. How does one explain in words something that was so atrocious that before its occurrence, it would have been deemed unimaginable? One reason that many individuals chose not to write or to share was because they did not feel there were words capable of describing what they had experienced or were currently feeling. Given the atmosphere in France at the time that many survivors emigrated to it, when Gaullism and the myth of the Resistance were just beginning to take hold, open communication concerning the Holocaust testimonial process was frowned upon. Survivors who felt the need to speak had trouble finding an audience, and therefore, had trouble speaking. As

²² “A peine commençons-nous à raconter, que nous suffoquions” (Antelme, *L'espèce* 9)

Laub explains, “Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody; to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time” (Feldman and Laub 70-1). The survivors who emigrated or returned to France following liberation found themselves in a unique position, because of particular actions the country had taken in the war, namely the collaborationist relationship with Germany and the forced deportation of 82,000 Jews. The very presence of survivors served as a constant reminder of these actions for the general French public, and as a result, survivors found that sympathetic witnesses were often hard to come by. This unstable political and social environment proved to be one factor that prevented some survivors from speaking about their experiences for many years. Yet for others, the internal need to speak overpowered any forces they were feeling from outside themselves, and it was this innate energy that pushed them to communicate. What resulted from this collective effort to “celebrate memory” (Wiesel, *Rivers* 150) was the beginning of a new genre of literature related to the Holocaust experience.

Development of a Holocaust Literature

In an effort to explain and understand the events of deportation, concentration camps, and liberation, as well as their after effects on the survivors’ lives, and the lives of those around them, thousands of people have taken an avid interest in Holocaust literature, both in the form of the non-fictional narrative and the fictionalization of historically-accurate events. In the opening lines of his essay “Interpreting Survivor Testimony”, Lawrence Langer poses the question: “To whom shall we entrust the

custody of the public memory of the Holocaust? To the historian? To the survivor? To the critic?" ("Interpreting" 26). While there has been a lot of debate surrounding this issue, there seems to be no correct answer.

To some, the subject should be approached from a historical viewpoint. Since the claim has been made that feelings cannot be translated, there are those who believe that historically accurate facts and events should make up the majority of Holocaust literature. Therefore, although the feelings from the experience may not be transmitted, the setting will be.

There are others whose interest in the subject is purely analytical. Psychologists and critics such as Laub and Langer, and even college students writing their Honors theses, have taken an interest in the subject in an attempt to move the Holocaust into a more universal light, one that individuals who have very little contact with it, can begin to understand. Because the traumas of the Holocaust were not reserved only for the direct victims, but included much of the European society and its future generations, continued repercussions have necessitated analysis. For these individuals, the intended audience is other individuals who have very little knowledge about the Holocaust and feelings that resulted from it. There are several benefits of this third-person analytic and reflective point of view. First of all, to validate only works by those who survived would shrink the volume of literature considerably. Secondly, there were many people who were indirectly affected by the Holocaust, and to devalue the stories told from the third person perspective would devalue the feelings, experiences, and ideas of these individuals. Further, soon there will be no first-generation survivors of the Holocaust

still alive, and critic Michael Bernstein fears, “to prohibit anyone who was not actually caught in the Shoah from representing it risks consigning the events to a kind of oblivion interrupted only occasionally by the recitation of voices from an increasingly distant past” (45).

Yet for the individuals who had a first-hand experience, or for those who came in close contact with someone who had, writing about the Holocaust is a different matter altogether. Writers are encouraged to pick topics that are familiar and well understood, and it seems a viable argument that a topic as enormous and mind shattering as the Holocaust should be undertaken only if one has had direct experience with it. There are those who adhere to the belief that, “no one can speak for those murdered, and no one can determine what would count as further betrayal of their suffering” (Bernstein 44). The wealth of emotion (or surprising lack thereof) common in first-person narratives reinforces the belief that first-person narratives are better than their third-person counterparts. These writers appear not to be concerned with the type or size of audience, or the historical accuracy of their account, but with the psychological need to communicate experience. Instead of discussing the factual *what*, the important question concerning this type of writing is the emotional *why*. As has been explained, survivors often wrote in an effort to understand completely their own experiences, and also to share these experiences with others.

Factors Affecting the Narrative Process

Due to the difficulty many Holocaust survivors found transcribing their experiences and feelings into words, the narratives that resulted from these efforts are not without their faults. Just like the individuals themselves, memories and misperceptions in stories prevent them from being completely historically accurate and do not develop into unbiased reflections on the concentration camp experience. "One of the most pervasive myths of our era, a myth perhaps even [sic] partially arising out of our collective response to the horrors of the concentration camps, is the absolute authority given to first-person testimony" (Bernstein 47), because the events that occurred there were so horrible that outside of a camp, no one could have imagined them. Yet people do not see the flip side, the fact that a traumatic experience is frequently not remembered accurately. The passage of time can affect the number of and amount of detail in memories, and survivors may consciously change the specifics of an event in an attempt to cover up the horrible truth that is realized in transcribing. Other times the change is unconscious. Individuals traumatized by an event are likely not to be aware that their accounts are inaccurate. In an interview, an Auschwitz survivor recounts the Auschwitz uprising: "All of [a] sudden, we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding" (qtd. in Feldman and Laub 59), and she went on to provide vivid illustration of the event. Months later, her testimony was deemed inaccurate by a group of professionals who were exploring the subject of education and the Holocaust, because only one chimney actually exploded (Feldman and Laub 59). In this case, the historical accuracy was not as important as the fact that the survivor was able to share her story.

In other cases, storytellers are completely aware of the deficiency of memory that arose out of no fault of their own. Delbo prefaces *None of Us Will Return*²³ by saying, “Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain that it is truthful”²⁴ (*Auschwitz* 1). Similarly Duras prefaces *The War*²⁵, her postwar narrative of Antelme’s return with the statement, “I have no recollection of having written it. I know I did, I know it was I who wrote it...But I can’t see myself writing the diary...I can’t remember”²⁶ (*The War* 3). Since she has no recollection of having written it, the reader must blindly accept that things happened the way that they did. The fact that these survivors admit their limitations as storytellers before they even begin to tell their stories is an issue for consideration. However, writers let readers decide for themselves the significance placed on accuracy, or inaccuracy, of their experiences. For the intents of this paper, we will assume that the historical accuracy of the narratives discussed is of minimal significance, yet it needed to be mentioned to present an accurate picture of an historical narrative.

There are many other factors that play significant roles in describing accounts. The moral and religious upbringing of the individuals who survived the Holocaust has an effect not only on how they viewed their survival in the camps, but also on how they dealt with life afterwards. The duration and the dates of their internment are other factors that create unique views of the experience. For example, the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, who was held captive in Dachau and Buchenwald in 1939, felt only a minor

²³ *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*

²⁴ “Aujourd’hui je ne suis pas sûre que ce que j’ai écrit soit vrai. Je suis sûre que c’est véridique” (Delbo, *Aucun* 7)

²⁵ *La Douleur*

²⁶ “Je n’ai aucun souvenir de l’avoir écrit. Je sais que je l’ai fait, que c’est moi qui l’ai écrit,...mais je ne me vois pas écrivant ce Journal...Je ne sais plus rien” (Duras, *La douleur* 12)

effect of life in the camps on his character, while Austrian writer Jean Améry, who was interned at Auschwitz between 1943-1945, never again saw himself as “approximately the same person” (qtd. in Howe 177) as a result of what he experienced.

The length of time that passed between liberation from the camps and writing of the narrative is also different for each survivor. Some individuals felt the need to tell their stories to provide immediate relief from the experience, such as Antelme. He wrote his autobiography, *The Human Race*²⁷ two years after returning from the camps and then never again mentioned what happened there. Writers who choose to document their experience soon after their return are better able to remember details exactly the way they happened. Those who wait several years, or even decades, risk having inaccuracies enter their stories because of the length of time that has passed between the experience and the retelling. As Joseph Joffo admits in his narrative *A Bag of Marbles*²⁸, “Thirty years have gone by since I was that ten-year-old boy. Not only do we forget things, but our memory often plays tricks on us, altering the things that we remember. But the important part, the

²⁷ *L'espèce humaine*

²⁸ *Un sac de billes*

A Closer Look at Holocaust Narratives

Robert Antelme

Antelme is an important example of a survivor who began writing very soon after his return from the concentration camps. As a political prisoner, this Parisian member of the Resistance was taken to Buchenwald and Dachau after a short time in the Fresnes prison in 1943. Throughout the two years of his internment, he participated in work convoys and marches, and he lived through the liberation of Dachau in April 1945. Several of his close friends came to kidnap him from the typhus-quarantined camp, and for the entire journey back to Paris, he spoke incessantly about his experiences. The past year had weakened him greatly, and he was on the verge of death. However, “In the dreadful physical state he was in, he had become just words. He talked nonstop. Death itself was quite obviously no longer important because of the urgent necessity it imposed to say everything”²⁹ (Adler, *A Life* 143). For Antelme, recovery meant not only a physical return to health, but also a renewed mental clarity that allowed him to put the pen to paper and tell his wartime experiences.

What resulted from his never-ending voice was *The Human Race*, published in 1947. Antelme was a writer by profession, and this story stands out from numerous other accounts because of his ability to rid it of, “all linguistic affectations, grammatical conceits, games of hide and seek with reality” (Adler, *A Life* 168). Instead, he provides

²⁹ “Dans son délabrement physique, il n’est plus que parole... Il parle continûment... la mort même n’avait manifestement plus d’importance pour lui qu’en raison de cette urgence de tout dire qu’elle imposait” (Adler, *Margeurite* 332-3)

an accurate account of his experience and spares his readers no vulgarity or gory detail. His story starts with the sentence, “I went outside to take a piss”³⁰ (*The Human Race* 9). With this one short statement, the clear-cut and honest tone is set for the entire memoir, and is a good example of the writing style that is present throughout. He tells stories involving lice, vomit, and diarrhea in everyday language without metaphor or allusion. “It is a work whose pure simplicity proceeds from a profound sense of human complexity” (Morin x).

Following this attention-grabbing first line, Antelme speaks throughout the book very directly and concisely about the unconscious dehumanization of those around him as they try to survive their circumstances, and about how people clung to their humanity as best they could. He recalls a Spaniard and his son who have survived the camps together:

A father called an old fool in front of his son. A hungry old man who’d steal in front of his son, so the two of them could eat. Father and son covered with lice, the two of them no longer looking their true age, coming to look alike. Both hungry together, offering their bread to each other, with loving eyes. And both of them on the floor of the boxcar. Were both of them to die, who could bear it but the weight of their deaths?³¹ (*The Human Race* 262)

As an observer, he appears to be unaffected by his camp experiences, instead only observing others, like the two Spanish men. Without anger or vengefulness, near the end of the book, he calmly says, “Dachau lasted twelve years. When I was in high school the

³⁰ “Je suis allé pisser” (Antelme, *L’espèce* 15)

³¹ “Le père traité de con devant son fils. Le vieux affamé et qui volerait devant son fils pour que son fils mange. Le père et le fils couverts de poux; tous les deux perdant leur âge et se ressemblant. Les deux ensemble affamés, s’offrant leur pain avec des yeux adorants. Et tous les deux maintenant ici, sur le plancher du wagon. S’ils mouraient tous les deux, qui ne porterait que le poids de ces deux morts?” (Antelme, *L’espèce* 274)

block where we are now was in existence, the electrified barbed wire fence also”³² (*The Human Race* 287). In some ways, plain language such as this has a greater affect than literary stylization. After reading his account, readers are well aware of the concentration camp setting, and a very historically accurate analysis is presented as a result.

Because Antelme speaks so matter-of-factly about his experience, it seems as if he is writing not for the literary benefit of telling a story, but out of psychological need. Before and during the writing of *The Human Race*, Antelme’s thoughts were constantly on his experiences, and this narrative had several goals. First, it was written to relieve Antelme’s guilt for having lived when so many others had perished. Hating scorn, “he forever felt within himself the pain of any humiliation inflicted upon others; he forever identified with any victim of exclusion” (Morin xi). Secondly, the book stands as an effort to communicate, as best as Antelme could with his wife and friends, his experiences and their effect on him. A major part of his repatriation was his psychological adjustment to normal life, and he wanted those around him to understand the horrors that he lived through. “Marguerite [his wife] and Dionys [his wife’s lover and his good friend] are the engaged witnesses of this rebirth. Robert brings them with him, through words, to a place where he revisits and where he wants not only to bear witness but also to analyze philosophically all the consequences”³³. Public desire for survivors to keep quiet made this need to speak even stronger, and he was angered and frustrated by the negativity he felt around him concerning this major event in his life. His inability to

³² “Dachau a duré douze ans. Quand j’étais au collège, ce block où nous sommes existait, le barbelé électrifié aussi” (Antelme, *L’espèce* 315-16)

³³ “De cette renaissance, Marguerite et Dionys sont les témoins engagés. Robert les emmène avec lui par la parole dans ce lieu d’où il est revenu et dont il veut non seulement porter témoignage mais analyser philosophiquement toutes les conséquences” (Adler, *Marguerite* 338)

recreate the unimaginable for his friends made him all the more upset, as well as more determined to try to make people understand.

Finally, Antelme wrote in an effort to escape the memories of the experience. Although he was consumed by this subject and took to recounting his story quickly after his return, the Holocaust experience was something Antelme was never able to get over. “Having fought to return to the human race, to be a man who could hold himself upright, who could eat, talk, even sleep a little, Robert didn’t know how to be morally reborn into the world”³⁴ (Adler, *A Life* 145). Often, individuals write as a form of therapy, and it is likely that Antelme wrote about his experiences in order to move past them and go on living. Outwardly, he went on to lead a “normal” life: he remarried following his divorce with Duras, became a father, and got a job at Gallimard, the Parisian publishing company, but there remained a distance between him and everyone else. After publishing *The Human Race*, and because he made his living in the literary world, Antelme contemplated writing more about his Holocaust experiences. “He would have been a writer had he not felt that everything would be secondary after the book that recounted his supreme experience” (Morin xi), and so he did not write about, and rarely spoke of, his experiences. Because he led a very private life before the war and after the publication of his story, whether or not he eventually was able to come to terms with his experience is unknown. However, documentation on his former wife, Duras, indicates

³⁴ “Après avoir lutté pour redevenir physiquement un homme, un homme qui se tient, qui peut manger, parler et même un peu dormir, Robert ne sait plus comment renaître moralement au monde” (Adler, *Marguerite* 337-8)

that he was never able to move beyond his sadness and pain and return to the life he had before his deportation.

Elie Wiesel

Eliezer Wiesel was a survivor who immigrated to France following his liberation from Buchenwald along with many other survivors, because of France's traditional willingness to accept refugees. Returning to his native Hungary was not an option because he, "did not want to relive [his] childhood, to see [his] house in foreign hands" (*Trilogy* 131). Just as many other survivors went in search of asylum and acceptance, he boarded a train to Paris a few weeks after liberation. While there, Wiesel received many of the services being offered by the French government; being less than eighteen years old he was placed under the children's rescue society *Oeuvres de secours des enfants* (OSE) (Wiesel, *Rivers* 110). Through this group he was sent to children's summer camps, obtained an education, was provided with a monthly stipend, and was offered jobs to help him adjust to French society. In order to receive these allowances, Wiesel was required to learn French and to help participate in the upkeep of the chateau where he was staying. With the help of the OSE, he was able to adapt easily to French society, but internally he had difficulty moving past his memories. Eventually he went to study philosophy at the Sorbonne in order to confront the theoretical and philosophical questions that faced him regarding his internment and his memories of it.

Weighing most heavily on his mind was the subject of memory. During the years of his recuperation and development, Wiesel found that this was not something he could ignore, and he longed to explore it in great detail.

What would man be without his capacity to remember?...What does it mean to remember? It is to live in more than one world, to prevent the past from fading and to call upon the future to illuminate it. It is to revive fragments of existence, to rescue lost beings, to cast harsh light on faces and events, to drive back the sands that cover the surface of things, to combat oblivion and to reject death. All this I knew. And because I knew it, I told myself that I should write. (Wiesel, *Rivers* 150)

Yet as anxious as he was to find the answers to his questions, he also acknowledged, “I was aware of the deficiencies and the inadequacies of language. Words frightened me” (*Rivers* 150). Therefore, he gave himself ten years to experience and live with his memories before committing his words to the page. Due to the OSE language requirement, he chose to write his memoir *Night*, and many of his subsequent works, in French. His scholarly knowledge of the history and beliefs of the Jewish people led them to regard him as their spokesperson. In the following years, his work took him throughout the world as not only a writer but also as a speaker, winning him the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts and gaining him the worldwide status as one of the most famous survivors of the Holocaust. Despite his age, he continues to speak and write as a voice of the millions who lost their lives to the concentration camps.

The writings of Elie Wiesel are powerful in that they discuss almost all issues concerning the Holocaust, and the speakers in his works view the Holocaust from many different perspectives and have varying levels of experience with it. In *Night*, he presents readers with a strong first-person testimony regarding his experiences while in the camp.

Subsequent writings touch on the impact of time and memory after reentering the status quo and draw on the second-hand experiences of others. As he said in a foreword regarding his *Night* trilogy, which is made up of the stories *Night*, *Dawn*, and *The Accident*, “In *Night*, it is the ‘I’ who speaks; in the other two, it is the ‘I’ who listens and questions” (*Trilogy* 3). While other writers are able to focus solely on the recounting or solely on the analysis, Wiesel displays his talent as a writer by accomplishing both. These different perspectives increase his appeal to readers, especially those who read his works for emotional comfort, because he is able to discuss survival from many points of view.

Wiesel once acknowledged that, “I could write my memories of the camp, which I bore with me like poison...I thought about [them] day and night: the duty to testify, to offer depositions for history, to serve memory” (*Rivers* 150). These duties Wiesel took very seriously, and ended up dedicating his entire life to them. Unlike other individuals who were deported for political reasons, or because they were one of a handful of minorities, the group that Wiesel represents was the primary target for annihilation. Therefore, the concentration camp story of Wiesel is also the untold story of millions of others who were in his position but who did not survive to give their accounts. Because he had the courage to tell his story, he assumes the task of speaking for all who were silenced. In addition to speaking for those who are no longer alive to recount their story, Wiesel also becomes the voice for the multitudes of survivors who, for whatever reason, feel powerless to speak about their experiences, even though they themselves understand the ‘poison of memory’ about which Wiesel speaks. Phrases like, “The greatest shame is

to have been chosen by destiny” (Wiesel, *Trilogy* 239) and, “All I had cared for had been dispersed by smoke” (Wiesel, *Trilogy* 241) are likely to reflect similar thoughts of other survivors of the Holocaust, especially those who were also Jewish. Thus the significance of Wiesel’s words becomes even stronger, because he speaks not only for himself but for hundreds, or possibly even thousands, of individuals who had experiences similar to his own but who felt they had no voice with which to share them.

As stated in the introduction, *Night* has become the quintessential Holocaust story, because it fits the mold of the standard deportation and internment narrative. The span of the novel encompasses Wiesel’s entire internment experience, beginning with the occupation of Sighet, his hometown, by the Gestapo in 1944, and ending with the liberation of Buchenwald by American troops a year later. Wiesel provides what have become the stereotypical details of a Holocaust narrative: he recounts journeys in cattle cars and on death marches, the work, the squalid living conditions, and the constant presence of death and terror. He also presents first-person testimony of experiences that many people had never heard of before, experiences that were worse than many people could imagine: “Not far from us, flames were leaping up from a ditch, gigantic flames. They were burning something. A lorry drew up at the pit and delivered its load—little children. Babies! Yes, I saw it—saw it with my own eyes...those children in the flames” (Wiesel, *Trilogy* 41). It is important to point out that although these details have become stereotypical, it may be this very work that made them so, and at the time of its publication, there were very few books on the subject.

Unlike the clear-cut language of Antelme, all of Wiesel's writing is marked with literary style and analysis, mixing imagination with Jewish philosophy in varying proportions. While Antelme is not afraid to share the specific details of his experiences, *Night* almost seems censored, as if Wiesel is attempting to shield the true horrors of his experience from his readers. He explains it another way: "It is the style of the chroniclers of the ghettos, where everything had to be said swiftly, in one breath...there was never time or reason for anything superfluous" (*Rivers* 321). All his writings have this "deliberately spare style" (*ibid*), which at the same time is illustrative without being wordy, is descriptive without losing its focus. Yet the details are horrific enough to be left out of this story; it is not until reading his second documentation on the subject, the chapter entitled "Darkness" in his bibliography, *All Rivers Flow to the Sea*,³⁵ that this difference in detail is apparent. In this account, which was published in 1994, Wiesel does not spare the reader any terrors of daily life in the camps, and the same stories take on a much more realistic and horrific tone.

Following its publication in 1956, reaction to *Night* was mixed. René Lalo, a critic of the story, said that Wiesel, "would write nothing more after *Night*. In one sense, he was right: 'there was nothing more [he] could say about Auschwitz...But then, what to do with all this acquired knowledge? Is it not imperative to testify if only so as to leave a trace?'" (Wiesel, *Rivers* 320). As time passed and opinion filtered regarding *Night*, Wiesel began to find a voice where there used to be only void, to "create beauty out of nothingness" (qtd. in Langer, *Imagination* 30). He began to write essays and to lecture

³⁵ *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer*

and as he spoke, his writing took on a more literary and fictionalized tone. Over the decades following its publication, “Wiesel combined journalism, teaching, and an increased involvement in human rights activities with the production of a series of novels in which the Holocaust is always present in the background but rarely described” (Davis 124-125). If for no other reason, Wiesel continues writing because, “ultimately, to write is an act of faith” (Wiesel, *Rivers* 321).

In the works that followed *Night*, Wiesel blends fiction with parts of his own history to tell his stories. The majority of these works are anomalous, for although he has stated that there is no such thing as Holocaust literature (qtd. in Davis 124), Wiesel uses details of his own experiences as the mold to create situations and individuals that do not exist, in an effort to illustrate his themes and ideas. For example, his main characters in *Dawn* and *The Accident* both journey to Paris following their liberation from Buchenwald, and both refer to hometowns in Hungary; these details parallel Wiesel’s life exactly. One studies at the Sorbonne, and the other moves to New York later in his adulthood. In addition, these books touch on themes not common in the realm of Holocaust literature, but those that are significant because they were issues that many survivors and their families had to deal with: living, loving, and memory after the Holocaust, and the effect of the concentration camp experience on the children of survivors. His strong use of Jewish themes and Biblical stories and characters in allegories and descriptions give his works a strongly Jewish flavor that many other writers do not use.

Due to the wide variety of themes Wiesel approaches in his many works, the question arises of why he chooses these diverse characters and storylines in an attempt to come to terms with his own Holocaust experience. How does his use of fiction enable him to share his experiences with others? For the most part, the writing style of these works does not vary: succinct yet memorable imagery is provided, and while there is rarely a lot of dramatic action in his stories, the words and thoughts are powerful and significant. In stories whose only commonality is their apparent lack of relation to the Holocaust, he is able to show that, in fact, the Holocaust is present in many situations and time periods around the world.

One such story is that of Reuven, a Brooklyn native whose Jewish father survived the Holocaust. Recounted in the novel *The Fifth Son*, this story deals, on the surface, with son trying to relate to and understand his father. “He is an average man, of average height, with an average income, living in an average house in a neighborhood for average residents” (Wiesel, *The Fifth Son* 16), yet Reuven’s father is different because of his Holocaust experiences. While Wiesel’s personal connection to this story is unknown, his reason for writing it is not: undoubtedly there were thousands of children who grew up in the shadows of their parents’ Holocaust memories, and perhaps Wiesel has wondered if his own children felt the same weight of incomprehension that Reuven feels. Reuven says, “Born after the war, I endure its effects. I suffer from an Event [sic] I did not even experience” (qtd. in Fine 41); there is nothing he can do about this. By setting his story in America, Wiesel shows that the effects of the Holocaust were felt around the world, not only in Europe. As someone who has migrated to America after surviving just like

Reuven's father, the very act of writing about the Holocaust in a non-European setting, Wiesel illustrates that he has not forgotten his Holocaust experience either. In addition, using the conflict of a father-son relationship as a disguise, Wiesel illustrates how the Holocaust continues to be an important part of contemporary life and family relationships.

Wiesel wrote another story that also takes place in America, and appears to have even less relation to his painful past, at first glance. In *The Accident*, the main event of the story occurs when a taxi hits the main character Eliezer. Although it has been many years since he has returned from the camps, this incident is a turning point in Eliezer's life because he is forced to accept the effect of the past on his life in order to keep living. He speaks throughout the book of the continual presence of death, after having seen it so close in the camps, and how to manage death and life together. "The problem is not: to be or not to be. But rather: to be and not to be. What it comes down to is that man lives while dying, that he represents death to the living, and that's where the tragedy begins" (Wiesel, *Trilogy* 275). The character in this story is unable to accept his ability to survive when so many others had not, and feels as if death would be the proper way to deal with his guilt. After reading the works of many other survivors, it is clear that this thought is common.

Publication of Wiesel's stories is proof that he was able to survive his traumatic past and adjust to normal society. Yet the continual presence of the Holocaust in each of them indicates that his past is something he continues to face. In each story, he presents his experiences from different perspectives, showing a multitude of responses to them. In

a time when first generation survivors are rare, this literature becomes even more significant, as each story illustrates the aftermath of the Holocaust in different ways. They become a springboard for him to imagine what could have happened, and to allude to some of his own doubts. Would he have ended up in a situation similar to Elie in *Dawn* had he chosen to go to Palestine? Do his children have the same questions as Reuven in *The Fifth Son*? From reading the words of Mado, we know that many other survivors no longer wanted to live with their memories, just like Eliezer in *The Accident*. By sharing so much information about his experiences, Wiesel writes in an effort to find an audience that can empathize with his feelings. He speaks not only for people, but also to them, and his comfort seems to come from being able to write about subjects he knows others will relate to, whether it is a strongly Jewish message or flashbacks of terrors from the camps, and by finding someone who relates.

Charlotte Delbo

Standing in stark contrast to the straightforward and concise narratives of survivors such as Antelme and the universality of experience of Wiesel is the imaginative literary styling of Charlotte Delbo. A French woman who was deported because of her dealings in the Resistance, she survived Auschwitz and Ravensbrück and returned to France after the war. Unlike Antelme and Wiesel, she had a solid reputation in the literary world; she was an accomplished dramatist, poet and intellectual before her deportation (Rittner 58). Delbo wrote her memoirs to serve several purposes: she wanted, like Wiesel, to communicate, as concisely, thoroughly and as truthfully as

possible through human language, her experiences with others in commemoration of those who had not survived, and she wanted, “her memories of German occupation, French collaboration with the Nazis, and the deportation of the Jews and political prisoners to concentration camps to still serve a moral function” (Goertz 164-5), and to stand the test of time.

The psychological need to write played a large part in Delbo’s return to health following her liberation. As she relearned the daily functions of her life “before,” such as eating with utensils while sitting at a table, she also struggled emotionally to move past the traumas that she had experienced. For the rest of her life, she struggled with “explaining the inexplicable” (qtd. in Rittner 329), and the literary style of her novels introduce this concept well. Delbo’s need for psychological healing prompted her to begin writing soon after her return to France; however, it was twenty years before anything was published. Beginning in 1965, she went on to publish several works regarding her life during and after her internment, most notably the trilogy *Auschwitz and After*³⁶.

Most striking about these stories is the unique literary style that Delbo employs. All the works are made up of short vignettes that range from cohesive paragraphs, to broken syntax that resembles poetry, to rambling streams of consciousness. Similes and metaphors abound as well, and each story stands alone because of the images it both invokes and implies. Despite the literary language that Delbo employs, there is at the same time clarity and conciseness; although she uses imagery to convey her meaning, her

³⁶ *Auschwitz et Après*

work is powerful because of what is left out. Her change of subjects and syntactical style lend credence to the idea that life inside the camps was in constant flux, what with new prisoners suddenly coming, familiar comrades inexplicably leaving, and a lack of consistency to the days. The ability, or inability, to remember events completely is also reflected in her style. Regardless of the accuracy of the memory, the vignettes are significant because of the deeper issues and images they imply rather than what they explicitly state. “Delbo invites people to read between the lines, note gaps and silences, imagine what cannot be said, and understand that the text is merely the external form of traumatic experiences that it cannot contain” (Goertz 169). In order to understand the depth of Delbo’s talent, it is best to look at excerpts from her writing.

None of Us Will Return, which is the story of her experiences in the camp and the people she encountered while there, begins with a detailed comparison between the gates of Auschwitz and a train station. The main gates to Auschwitz are similar to a regular train station in that, “People arrive”³⁷ and, “People leave”³⁸ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 3). Yet unlike a normal train station, “there is a station where those who arrive are those who are leaving”³⁹ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 3). Here Delbo implies a lot with these simple words. With the development of this extended metaphor, these first few pages set the tone for the entire work, and given the context it is quickly understood that, “The station is not a railroad station. It is the end of the line”⁴⁰ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 4). In addition, Delbo

³⁷ “il y a les gens qui arrivent”

³⁸ “il y a les gens qui partent” (Delbo, *Aucun* 9)

³⁹ “il est une gare où ceux-là qui arrivent sont justement ceux-là qui partent” (Delbo, *Aucun* 9)

⁴⁰ “La gare n’est pas une gare. C’est la fin d’un rail” (Delbo, *Aucun* 11)

establishes for herself a literary presence very different than most other Holocaust writers.

The mystery that she alludes to in these opening pages is not limited to the exact definition of this train station; Delbo is creating a tone for the entire work, and at the same time the whole trilogy. Through its lack of continuity and fluency, the book produces an element of uneasiness or discomfort in all who read it. Delbo is able to simulate the Holocaust experience for readers through the structure and language of this book. Just as the prisoners had to figure out and adjust themselves to the routine daily life inside the camps, her readers must also seek out for themselves the flow, and even the point, of her writing. In a constantly changing environment, it is hard to find a rhythm in daily activities, and *None of Us Will Return* proves that the same can be true for literature as well. Without consistent meter from vignette to vignette, the audience continues to read, not knowing what awaits them with the turn of each page, just as prisoners could not be sure what the next day would bring. Because Delbo was alive to write her memoirs after returning from the camps, readers can be certain that there was a conclusion to her internment, just as they can be certain there is a conclusion to her memoirs. In an effort to understand how liberation came about, one must continue reading, and delve into her literary tricks, that begin with the first vignette. Once the audience is able to understand that, “the largest station in the world”⁴¹ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 3) is actually Auschwitz, the horror is similar to what concentration camp victims felt when they realized the end result of their internment.

⁴¹ “la plus grande gare du monde”(Delbo, *Aucun* 9)

Later in the same work, Delbo presents another metaphor that conveys deep meaning regarding the coexistence of beauty and evil in the simple form of a tulip. This selection beautifully illustrates Elie Wiesel's idea that, "every word contains a hundred, and the silence between the words strikes us [readers] as hard as the words themselves" (qtd. in Goertz 170). This entire discussion takes place in only a few paragraphs, but is a strong enough image to stay in the reader's mind long after finishing the book. For several days during one winter, the prisoners walk past a house on their way to work in a trench, and they see the brightness of the flower in a window. The prisoners' spirits are lifted because they realize that it is still possible for beauty to exist, despite all the horrors and evil they have seen, and the brightness of the tulip stands out like a beacon against the grayed world around them. "All day we dream of the tulip...The day was long, as long as all our days. Down at the bottom of the ditch we were digging, the tulip's delicate corolla bloomed"⁴² (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 61). For a brief moment, this appears to be a turning point in the narrative, for Delbo provides a rare uplifting event. However, within a few sentences this idea is completely changed when the prisoners learn later that the house that contains the tulip is the home of an S.S. officer. For the prisoners, it is a shock to realize that beauty and evil can exist in such close proximity to each other. After this realization, no one ever discusses or thinks of the tulip, and they lose their belief that beauty can still exist in the world. Readers also feel the same horror at this realization.

⁴² "Tout le jour nous rêvons à la tulipe...La journée était longue, aussi longue que toutes les journées. Au fond du fossé que nous creusions, la tulipe fleurissait dans sa corolle délicate" (Delbo, *Aucun* 98-99)

By telling short vignettes about different aspects of life in the camp, Delbo accomplishes several things. First of all, her “narrative” is not a narrative in the general sense; although there is a chronological passage of time throughout, there is no main line that guides us through the story. Instead, numerous stories taken from different perspectives with diverse subjects give valuable information about daily life in the camp, and illustrate the vitality and humanity that existed among the inhabitants. In addition, it does not take the form of a traditional narrative. This work is not a chronological story about just Delbo’s experiences at Auschwitz; it is about the experiences of those around her as well. It was never her intention to write a firsthand account, and *None of Us Will Return* works instead to speak for all those who were unable to speak for themselves (Rittner 59). Written in the present tense, it continues to live, even though the events it describes are over half a century old. It is an excellent example of life within the camp walls, in which over time the outside world becomes something completely foreign. The diversity in writing style from vignette to vignette illustrates the diversity and humanity that existed in each prisoner, and illustrates the idea that everyone’s perception is different. By breaking the story into small choppy anecdotes, Delbo is able to cover a wide range of subjects, including conversations between prisoners as they tried to get to know each other and support each other in “Dialogue” (Delbo, *Aucun* 26), the horrors of daily roll call in “Role Call” (Delbo, *Aucun* 37), and the duplicitous dehumanization by the SS of the prisoners in selections such as “The Orchestra” (Delbo, *Aucun* 169).

As a result of these elements, there is neither a definitive beginning to Delbo’s story, nor a clearly defined end. Like history, this story cannot be forced into an enclosed

time frame. Nowhere does she explain how she arrived at the camp, and readers are not told in this first installment how she survives. Unlike most conventional pieces of Holocaust literature, or the idea of the conventional Holocaust ending, the last few stories do not recount the liberation of the camp, or even allude to a happy ending. In this respect, Delbo is demonstrating that for her, and for other survivors, the experience did not begin with her deportation and end with her liberation. As she says in her posthumous work, *Days and Memory*, “Auschwitz is so deeply etched in my memory that I cannot forget one moment of it.—So are you living with Auschwitz?—No, I live next to it” (qtd. in Langer, *Ashes* 330). With this example of internal dialogue, Delbo shows how previous experiences have all played a part in developing her current character, and also how it has been impossible for her to forget this part of her past. This is the same for everyone, yet not everyone is conscious of it. Many survivors shared Delbo’s feeling, and were often frustrated when those who did not experience life in the camps expected those who did to eventually “get over it” and close their minds to the memories of their Holocaust experiences.

This failure to see an ending to her Holocaust story with her liberation is witnessed by the two remaining stories in her Auschwitz trilogy: *Useless Knowledge*⁴³ and *The Measure of Our Days*. In this second volume, Delbo faces the knowledge she has gained through living through the camps, and rhetorically tries to discover the purpose and use this knowledge will be to her. Additionally, understanding that the Holocaust experience lasts longer than just the time in the camps for everyone who was there, she

⁴³ *Une connaissance inutile*

takes an interest in learning about the different ways that different individuals worked at regaining life. The result of this interest is the third work in the trilogy.

Similar in format and style to her first, the vignettes in this third work focus on the readjustment of interned individuals to their families and daily life after their Holocaust experiences. As before, some of the stories relate to just Delbo herself, while others are told entirely from the point of view of the men and women she interviewed. One interesting aspect of these first-person accounts from different survivors is that discussion of them comes in the third person point-of-view earlier in the trilogy. Both first and third person accounts exist in this work, but the style is the same as the *None of Us Will Return*: a mix of broken syntax narratives, conversations, and poetry. Because the setting for these stories is more normal and humanized environment, the literary creativity is more subdued than it is in the trilogy's first work. Also, unlike her other works, the vignettes relate to and mention each other, making the work a web of memory as the survivors discuss each other as the work progresses.

While in *None of Us will Return* the points of view change from first person narratives to third person accounts of Delbo's fellow survivors, *The Measure of Our Days* differs in that all the voice is given to the survivors themselves. All the stories are told in first person, while acknowledging Delbo as the narrator and author, and therefore, large blocks of monologue and dialogue are present. The first vignette, entitled "The Return", details Delbo's own return from the concentration camp. Beginning with the plane ride, she describes the transformation that takes place as she and her fellow companions re-enter the real world; the reality and the persons from the concentration camp life changed

to fit the new reality. “I watched their transformation under my very eyes, saw them grown transparent, blurred, spectral...When we arrived, I could no longer recognize them”⁴⁴ (*Auschwitz* 235). She also recounts her feelings, using the same level of detail and literary tools. The rest of the book consists of stories she has gathered from personal interviews with friends and acquaintances who are among the survivors of Auschwitz, and they are telling because of the humor and the life that exists, which contrasts with the lack thereof when the women knew each other in the camps.

Rather than speaking directly to her readers, Delbo allows the stories to speak for themselves, and they do so very effectively. For example, the dialogue of the numerous speakers illustrates the importance of the friendships and communications with survivors, regardless of the number of years that have passed. When Delbo visits with a former prisoner she is told, “Charlotte, you know that this is your home, here with us, with your comrades”⁴⁵ (qtd. in *Auschwitz* 288). The variety of these stories also show how the Holocaust continues to live inside everyone who survived it, because conversation regarding it occurs everywhere, in a survivor’s living room or in a train car in Paris.

The thoughts that Delbo shares through her writing are powerful because they reflect a very personal voice. In the vignette “A Year and a Day”⁴⁶, she compares her current liberated life to that of her life in the camps, noting at the same time the small amount of time yet the large amount of difference that separate the two. “I couldn’t wash, change my underwear, make my bed, eat, make the smallest gesture without

⁴⁴ “Je les regardais se transformer sous mes yeux, devenir transparentes, devenir floues, devenir spectres...A l’arrivée je ne les reconnaissais plus” (Delbo, *Mesure* 9)

⁴⁵ “Charlotte, vous savez que vous êtes chez vous ici. Entre comarades” (Delbo, *Mesure* 99)

⁴⁶ “Une année et un jour”

finding its counterpart in something I'd been doing the previous year"⁴⁷ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 301). What is striking about this story is how commonplace this comparison is; people frequently match up different parts of their lives with statements like, "A year ago, at this hour..."⁴⁸ (Delbo, *Auschwitz* 301), in an attempt to express how quickly life can change. By writing about a horrible experience in terms that anyone can understand, Delbo is able to make connections with her readers. This parallelism puts the Holocaust story into perspective for someone who was not there, and the reader can begin more fully to understand the survivor's story.

The level of literary adeptness and analysis present in these three works could not have been created by everyone, and Delbo's practice in the literary world gave her the skills to create these works. The large amount of time spent finding and documenting the stories of numerous survivors indicates that material for this third book was years in the making. Because Delbo focuses so much time interviewing the women and compiling their stories into one volume, it is clear how important the telling of these stories, and the relating of memory and trauma to those who did not experience it directly, was to her. Because Delbo's husband was killed during the war, the life she returned to upon her liberation was drastically different from the one she had left. Being a writer, it became natural for her to discuss her experiences, and as more time passed she was able to evaluate different aspects of them. Besides her *Auschwitz* trilogy, Delbo published a

⁴⁷ "Et quand je me lavais, et quand je changeais de ligne, et quand je faisais mon lit, et quand je mangeais, le moindre geste que je faisais, tout avait sa correspondance avec un geste que je faisais l'année d'avant" (Delbo, *Mesure* 124-45)

⁴⁸ "Il y a un an, à cette heure-ci,..." (Delbo, *Mesure* 124)

work about her deportation and arrival at the camp called *The Convoy of January 24*⁴⁹, and a more reflective and rhetorical piece called *Days and Memory*, which is about her process of recovering from the war.

Compared to Antelme, who wrote his memoir and never spoke of his internment again, and Wiesel, who dedicated his life to speaking about his experiences, the writings of Delbo fall somewhere in the middle. Like Antelme, she wrote her memoirs soon after her return in an effort to come to terms with her memories and her traumatic experiences. As illustrated by the publication of *The Measure of Our Days*, she focused a lot of time and energy not only on her experience, but also on preserving the memories of other survivors, just as Wiesel did. Yet Delbo differs from both these men because she waited several decades before sharing her works with the rest of the world. Another difference is that for her, there was not only a psychological need for their publication, but also a political one. Charles De Gaulle, who had once again become the leader of France, was pushing his idea of the perpetually victorious France in an effort to wash away any doubts of weakness in the French peoples' minds (Goertz 165). Part of this "resistencialist myth", as mentioned earlier, was the augmentation of heroic resistance stories from World War II, and minimization of the opposite. Being a former member of the Resistance, Delbo published her works as an act of defiance against this public call. "By foregrounding her concentration camp experiences rather than her activities in the resistance movement, she chose to oppose the national trend of evading unfavorable memories" (Goertz 165). Additionally, her stories are filled with political analogies and

⁴⁹ *Le convoi du 24 janvier*

discussions in an effort show her frustrations with De Gaulle's claim, and with the change in French attitude towards the war experience.

Other Forms of Communication

Despite the similarity of subject and historical setting, the three narrators evaluated in this section differ drastically, not only in their writing styles, but also in their reaction to their experiences and their return to normal life following the war. Each individual could be evaluated on a psychological level to see which style best deals with the traumatic events, but for the goals of this paper, that does not seem to be significant. The variety only indicates the individuality of every human being. These few who survived the Holocaust at all illustrate the randomness of chance, for all but a small percentage perished. Additionally, the way that each survivor dealt with the trauma of his or her return was as unique and varied as their lives before their interments. Later, when no survivors are left to recount their experiences firsthand, recorded stories will be all that is left to perpetuate this thought and this period in human history. Without their narratives, valuable insight into not only historical events, but also the human mind, would be lost.

While these authors represent different writing styles, and while their words represent their reactions, there are still countless others who differ drastically from the examples discussed here in not only the style of their language, but also in their reason for writing. There were the families of survivors who wrote in an attempt to understand what their loved ones were going through upon their return. The exact details regarding

Antelme's freedom from the camp can be compared in both his and his wife's memoirs to understand different points of view on the same event. Children of Holocaust survivors also wrote in an attempt to understand the experiences of their parents, or out of guilt for not being able to understand, as Wiesel illustrates in *The Fifth Son*. As a real-life example, Frenchman Patrick Modiano documents his contemporary search for a captured Parisian Jew in *Dora Bruder* as an attempt to understand his father's war-time experience. He goes to great lengths to learn details of the girl's life, and this near-obsession seems very odd until the reader understands that Modiano's search is actually a personal journey into the life of his father during the Occupation period in an attempt to close the void that separates the two men.

Based on the examples provided in this discussion, it is clear that the library of Holocaust literature is vast and diverse. To categorize and include the works that have been produced as a result of this event would be a major task, not only in terms of time, but also in the depth of analysis required. Additionally, the collection of creative responses to the Holocaust is not limited to written documentation. Survivors found many other outlets for their emotions and ways to express their memories through music, art, the spoken word, or other forms. Regardless of the form or artistic quality of the works that were produced as a result of the healing process, these pieces are important for the time period and circumstances they represent. In this respect they are invaluable.

Conclusion

Near the climax of *Dawn*, Wiesel's main character Elie is sitting in an almost empty room when he finds that it has suddenly become stuffy with the presence of many other individuals. At first glance, he notices a few familiar faces, but eventually he comes to realize that most of the people that have come into the room are the ghosts of people he knew at different points in his life: his parents, childhood friends, comrades he met in the camps, and even a small boy who is a younger version of himself. "Among them were all the people I had known, people I had hated, admired, forgotten. As I let my eyes wander about the room, I realized that all of those who had contributed to my formation, to the formation of my permanent identity, were there" (Wiesel, *Trilogy* 166). He asks one of them why they are there. "We're simply here because you're here," the younger version of himself says. "We're present wherever you go; we are what you do... You carry us with you. Occasionally you may see us, but most of the time we are invisible to you" (Wiesel, *Trilogy* 182-3).

With this particular example, Wiesel illustrates the role that memory has in his character Elie's life and suggests that this applies to everyone. People are unique and different because their varied experiences play a role in shaping who they become. A profound experience stays with someone forever, regardless of the number of years that pass or other changes that occur. For survivors, the Holocaust was such a traumatic event that it seems to be nearly impossible for someone to go through it and escape unaffected by it. By physically manifesting memory in the form of the ghosts of all the influential people in Elie's life, Wiesel is able to show that one's past never goes away; it instead

haunts us with its presence. Yet Wiesel's claim is not only a work of fiction; Mado spoke of memory in a very similar way when she mentioned the spirits of Mounette and other survivors present in the room following her son's birth, and many other survivors spoke of the presence of fellow prisoners for many years following liberation.

Yet it is not only horribly traumatic memories that influence future decisions, and it is not only those who have been affected by trauma earlier in their lives, who carry their pasts with them. The experiences of everyone are affected by commonplace events, running the scale from joyous to horrifying, all at different degrees. Certain periods of life naturally are marked by significant experiences, especially in the shift towards adulthood with moving to college, gaining independence, and establishing a career. Yet regardless of age or a handful of other considerations, people's days are shaped by experiences, and what may appear to be the most trivial can have an impact large enough to change the rest of their lives, without affecting outward appearances at all. This lack of physical change hides the actual emotional one and may even disguise the truth that change has occurred.

In the same way that all people are affected by memory, they have the same difficulty that survivors felt in transmitting their feelings to others who had not been there at the time an event occurred. Not everyone is faced with the hostile political, social, and economic environment that survivors immigrating to post-Vichy France faced. They may instead only have had to deal with friends or family who are not interested in listening to their story, or the fact that no one noticed the change had occurred at all. Yet almost all those who suffer feel the same need to share their memories in an effort to move past

them. And although their traumas may not have been as horrifying as the concentration camp at Auschwitz, and they will not carry the same level of guilt as a survivor, they still find difficulty in articulating what they have gone through. The end of a serious relationship, a family move, a near-fatal car crash, or a drastic change in living conditions are examples of events that are commonplace enough that people can understand them, but at the same time may be specifically so traumatizing that no words may be able to express them.

Everyone encounters times in their lives when everything is going wrong and it appears as if no one else's pain could begin to compare to one's own, or that no one would be able to understand one's difficulties. After learning about the experiences of other people, whether it is through reading memoirs or some other form of personal communication, however, it is possible to gain an understanding of the similarities of human experience. By comparing their commonplace traumas to the life of a Holocaust survivor, people can put their own pain into perspective. Life went on for the thousands of people who were able to survive the concentration camps, and as the stories in this paper have illustrated, everyone, even those who were not there, were forced to adjust to what came after. In just the same manner, the everyday traumas that those of us who were not there will also become a part of memory, as we too learn to understand that life goes on, not by any choice of our own, but because time wills it.

Figure 1: Occupied and Unoccupied France



Source: Gildea 57

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