THE BLACK HOLE OF MEMORY: FRENCH MNEMOTECHNIQUES IN THE ERASURE OF THE HOLOCAUST

MICHAEL DORLAND

Introduction

In the summer and fall of 2012, the French Republic seemingly closed the last two gaps in “the national memory,” as President François Hollande put it, in the Republic’s difficult engagement with French participation in the Holocaust. On 22 July, the 70th anniversary commemoration took place on the former site of the Vélodrome d’Hiver (the Vel d’Hiv, for short), a bicycle racing stadium (torn down in 1959), but where on 16 and 17 July 1942, the French police had rounded up 13,152 non-French Jews—8,160 being interned in the Vel d’Hiv before deportation to various camps in France, and at least 3,000 children directly to Auschwitz. The roundup was the biggest such action by the French police and undertaken with neither prompting nor the assistance by the German Occupier. The main French transit camp to the east, at Drancy on the outskirts of Paris and through which passed some 63,000 deportees, was itself also the site of a major commemoration on 21 September 2012 and the official opening of the Drancy Mémorial de la Shoah. On this occasion, President Hollande told his audience that it was no longer a question of making accusations—“Justice had passed, even if often too late.” What mattered now was to transmit what had occurred to future generations because “Learning from the past is the only way to prevent [such events] from reoccurring.”

oration in July, *Le Monde* had reported a survey that up to 67% of 15–35 year-olds had never heard of the Vel d’Hiv, nor had 25% of those over 65.²

France has been a site of major memory wars over its role both in the Second World War and, in particular, its contribution to the Judeocide for 70 years. In this it is no different from other Western European countries, with the notable exception of Germany. As Elizabeth Bellamy notes, in her *Affective Genealogies: Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism and the ‘Jewish Question’ After Auschwitz*, the French case of World War II memory is, in relation to “its own scarcely confronted ‘Jewish Question’[,] even more complex than Germany’s.”³

War, defeat and the occupation of France by Nazi Germany also entailed a new twist of the scarcely confronted Jewish Question, but in the form of the persecution, deportation, and almost total extermination of over 75,000 French- and more so non-French Jews refuged in France. The result of this accumulation of trauma, post-1945, was the repression of the French Judeocide from public memory, which lasted, except for occasional symptomatic outbreaks (in which films played a key role), well until the mid-1990s when Jacques Chirac in his first term as President formally recognized that the Republic had committed against its Jewish citizens crimes “without statute of limitations.”

In the French context (and in the theory of post-Holocaust affect more broadly), the struggle over public memory is thus framed and infiltrated by 1) collective and Individual trauma, 2) failed attempts at re-membering (trying to put back together what was sundered), that 3) eventually take the forms of symbolic acts of commemoration (for some) and the injunction to bear witness (for others). All these tactics of mnemotechniques are ultimately articulated through various practices of writing (novels, memoirs, historiography, as well

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² Stéphanie Le Bars, “La majorité des moins de 34 ans ignorant ce que fut la rafle,” *Le Monde*, 16 July 2012, http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/07/16/la-majorite-des-moins-de-34-ans-ignorent-ce-que-fut-la-rafle_1734195_3224.html. In his Vel d’Hiv speech, Hollande had stated that “The truth is that this crime was committed in France by France.” The statement produced some equivocation among right-wing politicians over confusing “France” with the “Etat français,” the official title of the Vichy regime. This prompted historians such as Suzanne Citron to remark in *Libération* that “when the entire bureaucracy, every single magistrate but one, when the majority of the deputies elected to the Chambre in 1936 all vote full powers to [Marshall] Pétain, is this an act by France or only of the Etat français?” Suzanne Citron, “Henri Guaino: une subjectivité négatrice de l’histoire,” *Libération*, 31 July 2012, http://www.liberation.fr/france/2012/07/31/henri-guaino-une-subjectivite-negatrice-de-l-histoire_836781.

as films) that are always at the same time acts of rewriting and transformation. I will focus below mainly on the interconnections between remembering and commemoration as these pose some of the more profound dimensions of the struggles over memory, and include as well important particularities of Jewish memory, so central both to the Holocaust in general and to its French context in particular.

I

Ruth Leys observes, usefully for the discussion to follow, that “Post-traumatic disorder is fundamentally a disorder of memory.” One of the central themes running through the entire discussion on trauma accordingly concerns its relationship to memory, and recent French thought would prove to be particularly enlightening in this respect.

One of the related corollaries here is that the difficulties of remembering recollections often took the form of unconscious strategies of forgetting, such as amnesia or falling into silence. As Alain Finkelkraut remarked in his 2000 book on the problems of thinking about the twentieth century—calling it “a historical monster” completely refractory to any ordering of human time—clearly one of the main dimensions of such monstrosity had to do with memory, or more exactly the inability to remember. As a result, a large literature developed dealing with the problems of memory from every conceivable perspective: biological and neurological, cultural, historical and sociological, with one portion devoted, not surprisingly, to the Holocaust. Here, however, much of the emphasis seemed to be on reclaiming memory—and Holocaust memory in particular. Thus, the resulting examination of artworks, public monuments, and Holocaust museums, which was, at the same time a

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6 For example, but not exhaustively, Pirjo Ahokas and Martine Chard-Hutchison, eds., *Reclaiming Memory: American Representations of the Holocaust* (Turku, Finland: University of Turku Press, 1997). See also Caroline Wiedmer, *The Claims of Memory: Representations of the Holocaust in Contemporary Germany and France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997). On another level altogether emphasizing the ambiguity of memory and the rhetoric of ruins, see especially James E. Young’s pathbreaking *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993). Much work of course has been done on memory since the 1990s, so much so that some today speak of a “memorialist turn” in the light of globalization that ironically has shifted research away from territorialized, nationally bound research such as Holocaust studies toward supposedly more open transnational approaches to “other” forms of memory.
displacement of memory onto either particular objects or collective rituals of commemoration. It is as if, given our individual problems with our own personal memories, remembering and commemoration had become “collectivized,” or surely socialized in ways not previously understood.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* explores the complex imbrications of contemporary memory, history, and forgetfulness. His motives in writing this book stemmed from a lengthy professional preoccupation with historical writing, but also from a “civic” sense of being troubled by the public implications of “the worrying spectacle” of too much memory here, too much forgetfulness there, compounded by “the influence of commemorations and the abuses of memory” (*MHO*, 1).

Ricoeur turned to the work of the founder of the twentieth-century sociology of memory, Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945). Halbwachs died at Buchenwald; his last days have been written about by Jorge Semprun in his 2002 *Le mort qu’il faut*, and movingly sketched by fellow detainee, artist Boris Tsilitsky. In 1925, Halbwachs had published *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* that defined the field of social memory; he returned to it in his *Mémoire collective*, posthumously published in 1949. Ricoeur insisted in *MHO* on the previously unnoticed radicality of Halbwachs’s distinction between collective memory and historical memory (512). In Halbwachs’s earlier work, the fundamental distinction had been between *individual* and *collective* memory, two very different ways of the organization of memory, but nonetheless still interconnected.

Not so with the idea of *historical* memory which, Halbwachs argued, went back to schooldays in which the student was first exposed to history primarily as dates that had to be memorized (facts, major events, and people)—that is, as material completely *exterior* not only to a young life but to that life’s experience. While the historically-obsessed Third Republic made some headway in bringing the teaching of history closer to lived memory, Halbwachs noted that this had mainly occurred *after the fact*, and largely by way of national commemorations, including national narratives, myths, and so on.\(^\text{10}\)

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\(^7\) The ability to recall a personal memory is, as Ricoeur remarked, near the end of a long life (1913–2005), “a small miracle.”


\(^9\) Jorge Semprun, *Le mort qu’il faut* (Paris: Folio, 2002). Tsilitsky’s sketches of deportation, in particular the so-called “small” Jewish camp within Buchenwald, and later paintings were displayed at an exhibition by the Museum of Jewish History and Culture in Paris in 2006.

For Halbwachs, the teaching of, or construction of, history was a form of violence from the outside exerted upon memory, that resulted, in Ricoeur’s words, in “the uncanniness of the historical past” (MHO, 513).

The ensuing problem concerned that of the transgenerational transmission of this uncanny form of history that operated first, through the construction of the idea of a generation as a we-group of a common age and so culture, but that was also anchored biologically in sexual reproduction as well as in the succession of generations; the old die out and are replaced by the new generation. Social links were thus firmly codified in the parental system of our societies where the biological and the social are brought together by affective familial ties as well as by juridical mechanisms like adoption. However, given the long chain of the succession of generations in an immense genealogical tree whose roots are lost in the soil of history, the ancestral stories, so familiar to so-called traditional societies, were eventually forgotten, and what remained was only the abstract and anonymous idea of generational succession.

In this way, living memory fell into the clutches of history. While traces of the past remained either in the form of books, the archaeological discovery of monuments, and public efforts by city authorities not to entirely obliterate the historical urban architecture, there still lingered on the horizon a historical will-to-power that sought to integrate into “an integral memory” the separate forms of individual, collective, and historical memory so that it became possible, in Halbwachs’s words, “To never forget anything” (“On n’oublie rien,” cited in MHO, 515).

Except that the complete absorption of lived memory by history did not quite happen. For one, Halbwachs commented on a “malaise” as regards the delimitation of the discipline of history and the ensuing endless turf wars over control of and sub-divisions within the historical field (as also in most other fields of knowledge). Secondly, the major frame of reference for historical memory remained predominantly that of the nation, even though between the nation and the individual there are countless intervening variables and groups. Thirdly, the role of historical writing and historiography assumed ever greater distance from collective memory in the name of the pursuit of scientific objectivity.11 And lastly, for Halbwachs, the opposition between the procedures of scholarly history and the exercise of collective memory took the form, as Ricoeur put it, of “a challenge addressed to his close colleagues [the historians of the so-called “longue durée”]” (MHO, 516). For Halbwachs, the very notion

11 On this, in the American context, see Peter Novick’s impressive That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
of “historical memory” became ever more problematic—as a result of which “memory” and “history” remained suspended in an uneasy, forced cohabitation.

The late Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory took the next step opened up by Halbwachs of further separating historiography from the sense of history that, Yerushalmi argued, had been invented by ancient Israel. By historiography is to be understood a self-reflexive discipline that analyzes over time the methods and interpretations used by historians. As such, historiography openly revealed the crisis that it had generated in the very heart of memory, both personal and collective, that by definition maintained itself alive through its transmission from one generation to another. In Halbwachs’s words, “History begins where tradition ends” (cited in MHO, 518). Historiography, however, attacked lived memory by “correcting it, displacing it, contesting it, interrupting it, and destroying it” (Ricoeur, MHO, 518).

Yerushalmi’s account of Jewish memory revealed itself to be both singular and exemplary. It was not to be confused with the oral tradition, especially not among a people as highly literate and devoted to reading and commentary as the Jews. Jewish memory, then, was highly charged with a sense of history, but not of historiography. The title of Yerushalmi’s lectures, Zakhor, is the injunction of the Torah to remember, not through the verbal, discursive, or literary ways by which, according to Ricoeur, the operations of historical distanciation worked (MHO, 519). Rather, the Jewish sense of history was sustained through the injunction to transmit the stories and laws of the Jewish experience, beginning with those stories closest to us familially, and moving to the entire collectivity interpellated by the words, “Hear, oh Israel” (Shema Yisroel, the holiest of Jewish prayers13), that abolish the distance between those close and those further away. Not only did the Jewish sense of history ignore historiography; but, as Yerushalmi puts it, “there is no equivalence between meaning in history, the memory of the past, and the writing of history” (cited in MHO, 520).

Problems, however, arose with the secularizing impulses of the Jewish Enlightenment and the rise of the professional Jewish historian in the project of “a science of Jewishness” (Wissenschaft des Judentums) early in the nineteenth century. But this science was, Yerushalmi argued, less the adoption of the

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12 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 24.
13 A parody of which, refracted through his Auschwitz experience, opens Primo Levi’s If This is A Man (Si questo è un uomo, 1958), first translated into English under the title Survival in Auschwitz (1960).
methods of scientific history than the radical critique of the theological sense of Jewish memory. Historiography thus equated to secularization; as Yerushalmi put it, “assimilation from without [and] collapse from within,” so that secular Jewish history—and particularly so that of post-1948 Israel—succumbed in many ways to the problems of any other national history (cited in MHO, 522). As Ricoeur remarked, for Yerushalmi, historiography had nothing to do with restoring memory; on the contrary, it represented an entirely new kind of memory, that of the rational project of wanting to save the past in its entirety. This “delirium of exhaustivity” (Ricoeur’s words, MHO, 522) became self-perpetuating and Faustian; and, also, as Nietzsche had remarked, there was something in the “‘historical sense’ that injures and finally destroys the living thing, be it a man or a people or a system of culture” (cited in Zakhor, 145, and not 147 as Ricoeur has it, MHO, 522).

The third prong of Ricoeur’s (and Yerushalmi’s) powerful assault against historiography dealt with the differences in the treatment of history between the first (1984) and third volumes (1992) of Pierre Nora’s monumental compilation entitled Les Lieux de mémoire.14 As we saw, memory progressively displaced itself from lived forms and became redeposited in various “sites” (“lieux”).15 For Nora, the “lieux” or sites of memory became more important because there no longer existed “milieux d’histoire” or environments of history. The consciousness of a break with the past was bound up with the sense that memory had been torn apart. History had led to “the eradication of memory” (Nora in Revel and Hunt, 632). Accordingly, “Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition” (Nora in Revel and Hunt, 633; Ricoeur, MHO, 523–528). Memory was “life,” while history was the “always problematic and incomplete” reconstruction of what is no longer. History is a critical discourse, antithetical to memory, perpetually suspicious of it, “and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (Nora in Revel and Hunt, 633). The “unification of history and memory”—the awkward translation Marc Roudebush gives to “histoire-mémoire,” the devouring of memory by history, in turn gave rise to, as Ricoeur put it, “a new figure” that Nora termed “memory seized by history” (MHO, 525; emphasis added). This new figuration of history had three characteristics or “symptoms,” as Ricoeur noted. One, it was an “archival” (Roudebush) form of memory—Nora used the

word “archivistic” (“archivistique”), which better captures the precariousness contained by what Leibniz had called “paper memory.” Ricoeur commented that the essays Nora gathered in Vol. 1 attested to the resulting corrosive and constraining character—again, of the violent imposition—of history from the outside. And this especially in the form of a materialization of history that, as of 1980—in France, the year of the Cultural “patrimoine”—and the ensuing, “very brutal” (Nora) inflation of the inverse correspondance of the former sites of memory to topographical sites given over to commemoration (Ricoeur, MHO, 525–526).

This entailed the reduction of memory to that of individual psychology, as a product of cultural compensation for the historicization of memory. Memory thus became a form of cultural duty or obligation. To paraphrase Nora, if memory was no longer everywhere, it was nowhere, unless taken in charge at one end by the culture industry and so dutifully placed before an individual consciousness at the other end, in the appropriate official locations (museums and so on). Ricoeur observed in a footnote (MHO, 526n94) that Nora’s point about the individualization of memory as duty made an explicit parallel with the recent turn of many non-religious French Jews to a reactivation of Jewish memory. As Nora put it:

In this tradition which has no other history than that of its own memory, to be Jewish is to recall Being, but this non-refusable (“irrécusable”) obligation to remember, once interiorized, places you, one after the other, in an entirely new situation.

Memory of what? Memory of memory. The psychologization of memory leaves everyone with the sentiment that one’s salvation, finally, depends upon acquitting this impossible debt. (This passage from Nora 1984, xxx–xxxi, does not appear in the Roudebush translation in Revel and Hunt)

The third symptom, from memory-as-archive to memory-as-duty, was memory-as-fracture (MHO, 526; Nora, 1984, xxxi). In Vol. 1, Nora had remarked that “museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders” (Nora in Revel and Hunt, 636) were “the beleaguered and cold” markers of a society without ritual, “a society deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal, one that inherently favours the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past.” This gave Ricoeur several further openings for his reflections later in MHO that the sites of memory are forms of transcription—that is, of writing. Second, it allowed Ricoeur to elaborate via the essay on “Generations” (in Nora, Vol. 1) on some of the problems he had mentioned in discussing
Halbwachs: namely, that the idea of “talking about my g-g-g-generation” (as the song by The Who put it, not Ricoeur) had inaugurated a symbolic rupture that resulted in a purely horizontal vision of the social bond in which one generation simply replaced another in a process of perpetual substitution (MHO, 530). For one example in France, take the immense resonances of “the May ’68 generation.” The implications for Ricoeur as for Nora (especially attached in Vol. II to the vertical idea of the memory-nation) were considerable. Memory, as predominantly generational, turned increasingly to commemoration. As Ricoeur noted, “We are thus in the realm of pure memory, that which makes a mockery of history, and abolishes duration to turn it into a present without a past” (MHO, 531). The past, if there at all, exists only to “memorialize” the present. As such, Nora wrote, “Commemoration has emancipated itself from its traditionally designated space, and it is the entire epoch that has become commemorative” (Nora, Vol. III, 998). The “era of commemoration” had become “infinite” (Nora, Vol. III, 1005).

The above discussion, however, sheds light on several problems relevant to the study of recent French historical writing at the narrow end and then to the broader question of memory in the Western invention of tradition. At the narrow end, it helps explain the persistent problems around the French writing of the history of the Resistance until the 1980s, in its inability to recognize the important role played by Jewish Resistance groups. In effect, that until further problematization of the nature of historical writing itself, the ‘history’ of the Resistance could only be at best that of the memoirs of the official Resistance generation, and only that. This, then, also explains the separate and parallel characteristics of early postwar studies by French Jewish historians as being framed by a different historical sense of the idea of history; here, against the millennial background of specifically Jewish history with its catastrophic antecedents going back to the Roman destruction of the Second Temple. Accordingly, for the goyim, to put it this way, writing the history of the Holocaust—and for that matter of the persistent uncanniness that Jewish survivors aroused among non-Jews—posed an even greater problem. In other words, and to be charitable about it, that part of such a history was itself enfolded within the long history of Christian anti-Semitism, and so called for a form of reflexivity regarding Western culture as a whole that was challenging, to put it mildly. It was easier, as it were, to ignore, repress, or pathologize the matter, as a further part of this larger challenge also had its specific ramifications for a potential rewriting of the various national histories of Europe, thus demanding a double self-reflexivity. The difference between these strategies was that to ignore or repress were still only largely unconscious acts, whereas to pathologize drew upon formidable the knowledge/power resources.
that, after Freud, Michel Foucault’s work was among the first to unveil to the present generation.

These differences in turn suggest another point; namely, the extent to which historiography itself, because of its problematic and uneasy relationship to lived memory as well as to trauma, or the traumatic nature of historical events, is profoundly entangled with related psychological phenomena—as a form of the will-to-power, for example, or even more clearly as a neurosis. Not for nothing did Henry Rousso frame his study of the problem of Vichy memory (1994) as a manifestation of neurosis. Finally, if the argument made by Nora about the dissolution of the past by an infinite era of Commemoration holds, this also connects the interrelationship of acts of Commemoration with the collective burden imposed upon survivors of being living witnesses to the bad events of recent history.

II

In France, the 1980s saw the biggest Commemoration of all, the 1989 Bicentennial of the Great Revolution of 1789. One of the many books on the “The Commemoration” is a 1999 reprint of a collection of articles by various leading historians, sociologists and so on, published in the journal Le Débat from 1983 on. Its cover, a photograph taken from the official, televised ceremonies, shows black-American opera star Jessye Norman who rendered “La Marseillaise” at the Commemoration opening night, draped in a long dress made from the tricolours of the national flag. The photograph powerfully recalls Roland Barthes’ famous essay in Mythologies (1957) about the black soldier saluting the French flag. There, he analyzed the signifier of this sign system as being, on one level, about France’s “imperiality,” although he went on to show that, in fact, it signified nothing at all. It was not, he wrote, about French imperialism “tied to the totality of ... the general History of France,” but rather a mythical concept “made of yielding, shapeless associations” and one “must firmly stress [that] ... it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation”—something whose fundamental character “is to be appropriated”. But if Commemoration is fundamentally about “appropriation,” it should not be forgotten that the late 1980s through mid-1990s was also when France at last began to appropriate into the “mémoire-nation” the French Jewish Question. Or at least, the beginnings of what

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sociologist Pierre Birnbaum in Vol. II of Nora’s Les Lieux de mémoire saw at the time as a possible “new deal” for Franco-Judaism.17

On 16–17 July 1942, some 4,500 Paris police, aided by the bus drivers of the CTRP (as the RATP was called then), rounded up between 12,500–13,200 Jews—men, women, and children—interning just over 8,000 at the Vélodrôme d’Hiver (or Vel d’Hiv, for short)18 not far from the Eiffel Tower at the time, but demolished after the war. The rest were directly sent to Drancy and then all were deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. This was the largest deportation of Jews from Paris by the Vichy government.

In 1949, de Gaulle had a square, bounded by the quais de Grenelle and Branly, the boulevard Grenelle, and the Bir-Hakeim bridge, dedicated to the memory of the “thirty thousand Jewish ... victims of racial persecution ... confined in this space by order of the Nazi occupier.”19 In the early 1960s, an architecturally stark Memorial to the Deportation was built at the tip of the Ile Saint-Louis, just behind Notre Dame, although French Jews are not mentioned explicitly there.

De Gaulle’s plaque was removed in 1986, to make way for a new one dedicated by then mayor of Paris Jacques Chirac on 18 July 1986. The Chirac

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17 Pierre Birnbaum, “Grégoire, Dreyfus, Drancy et Copernic;” 2679–2717. Copernic refers to the Paris street in which a synagogue was firebombed in 1980. The Abbé Grégoire at the time of the Revolution fought for the recognition of French Jews as citizens, but not as Jews. Drancy was the terminal outside Paris from which convoys were assembled for Auschwitz or equivalent one-way destinations. Drancy is also a central reference point in a recent feature film, Emotional Arithmetic, drawn from the novel by Canadian writer Matt Cohen.

18 As Sarah Schladow writes, “In France, the earlier discovery of damning government files and the opening of government archives had brought France’s war history, and the gap between national and Jewish perceptions of French complicity, again into question. While Vichy was now a subject for popular representations, the French government still avoided addressing the relation of various war criminals to genocide.... The passage in 1990 of a parliamentary bill against public denial of Nazi crimes sat in tension with hitherto tolerated liberal publication and legitimisation of revisionist views. Notwithstanding, the government remained reluctant, despite commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary in 1992 of the infamous Vélodrome d’Hiver roundup of Jews, to single out Jews amongst the victims of Vichy and Nazi policy, or to pass judgement on the ‘crimes’ of past French governments and French collaborators. However, increasing antisemitism and xenophobia in 1993, protested by Jews and Resistance groups, moved the government to inaugurate a national day of remembrance for ‘Jewish and other racial victims of Vichy policies,’ and to call for monuments at various French sites linked to concentration or deportation.” Sarah Schladow, “Regenerations of the Holocaust: From the Politics of Identification Towards a Political Identity,” Unpublished PhD Dissertation in Cultural Studies, Curtin University (2007), 298.

plaque gave more details, corrected the numbers arrested, broke them down by
gender and age (4,115 children, for instance), and re-stated that the deportation
had been done by the police of Vichy on order of the Nazi occupier. As
Wiedmer notes, while giving more information, the new plaque still did not tell
the whole story: for instance, that the members of the police involved stayed in
their jobs after the Occupation (45–46). The annual commemoration of the Vel
d’Hiv remained privately observed by various Jewish organizations until 1993
when President Mitterand made it a National Day of Commemoration of the
racist and anti-Semitic persecutions committed “under the de facto authority”
of Vichy or, by its official name, the Government of the French State. There
was further fiddling about with plaques and a kitschy monument was put up by
Mitterand.

But it was not until the July 1995 commemorative ceremony that
Chirac, beginning his first mandate as President of the Republic, admitted that
“France” patrie of the Enlightenment and the rights of man had, on 16 July
1942, “accomplished the irreparable,” broken its promises and delivered its
wards to their executioners: “We owe [the Jews deported from France] a debt
without statute of limitations” (cited in Wiedmer, 53). Even so, it was not until
1997, emblematized in part by the trial of Maurice Papon—a Vichy préfet in
charge of deportations in the Gironde, who later rose under de Gaulle to head
the Paris police and oversaw the 1961 police-riot and murder of several
Algerians protesting the war in Algeria—20—but also because then prime
minister Lionel Jospin had committed his new government to assist the
Commission recently formed to (finally) investigate the wartime appropriation
of Jewish property, to open up the official archives of the Vichy period, and to
fund the creation of what became the Mémorial de la Shoah, that the French
Holocaust became part of the national memory. The 1997 commemoration of
the Vel d’Hiv thus marked its entry into the commemorative pantheon and,
today, where only a few thousand commemorants once stood in memory, it has
become a major media event. It is the same story for the site of the Drancy
camp: speeches by the President of the Republic, solemn media coverage, and
so on. As Wiedmer also notes, since 25 April 25 1954, every last Sunday in
April is the National Day of Memory of the Deportation, to remember the
liberation of the camps and, as she puts it bizarrely given her book’s topic, “the
end of suffering” (49).

Of the subsequent French debates over Holocaust memory and
representation, I’ll briefly mention two. One began in March 1966 when a
young French journalist, Jean-François Steiner, published his Treblinka: The

20 Papon died in 2007 and was quietly buried, wearing his Legion of Honour.
Revolt of an Extermination Camp,\(^{21}\) a mix of history and fictional ‘reconstructions’ that went on to become an international best-seller and was quickly translated into English, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Japanese. In Paris, the book became the centre of an intellectual scandal that raged for the next six months, involving leading figures like Simone de Beauvoir who had written a glowing preface, the critic George Steiner and other literary luminaries (Elie Wiesel, Jean-Paul Sartre, etc.). In an interview, Steiner himself started the controversy by raising the question of to what extent the Jewish deportees, here members of the Sonderkommando, were ‘complicitous’ in the Nazi extermination machine. The same claim made in the U.S. about the Judenrate (Jewish Councils) by Hannah Arendt in 1963 and earlier by historian Raul Hilberg in 1961 had unleashed furious controversy, though far more so for Arendt at the time than over Hilberg’s extremely meticulous study. The “Steiner Affair” raised similar hackles in France, but, as Samuel Moyn noted in his 2005 study, for different reasons.\(^{22}\) For one, the predominant French view of the Holocaust had scarcely paid much attention to the extermination camps, as opposed to the concentration camps, where the bulk of (non-Jewish) French Resisters were held. In discussing the extermination camps, there was no avoiding the fact that the vast majority of the exterminated were Jews. In this sense, as Moyn remarked (5), the role played by the Treblinka affair was a watershed in France in the public uses and discussion of Holocaust memory that opened it up from its previous restriction to a small and unknown coterie of scholars, marginal to the established disciplines. Second, Steiner consciously wrote his book “as a popular ‘Western’,” as Moyn put it (7), freely admitting that he had “imagined” parts of it, to make the facts speak more truly, so to speak. As well, his French publisher, Fayard, forced him to remove some unflattering remarks about professional historians, people who do not take journalistic arrogance lightly.

In 2003 a further controversy broke out with the publication of art historian Georges Didi-Huberman’s *Images malgré tout*.\(^{23}\) Claude Lanzmann, explaining why his 1984 film *Shoah* had not used conventional documentary footage, had famously remarked that it was because such images from within

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the death-camps did not exist, adding that if he had found such in the many years of research on the film he would have destroyed them. Didi-Hubermañ’s book was a response to Lanzmann as well as other critics, that such images did in fact exist—and in particular four photographs ostensibly taken from within Auschwitz gas chamber V by an anonymous member of a Sonderkommando in August 1944 that shows gassed bodies being cremated in outdoor incineration pits (State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, photo negatives Nos. 277–278, 282–283, in Didi-Huberman, 24–27). Much of the resulting argument had to do with technical discussion of what images show and do not, and how did the person taking the shots get hold of a camera. Didi-Huberman’s main point, however, was to stress the idea of “in spite of it all” (malgré tout)—that is, that the debate over “how to read” the Holocaust was not settled at all.

III

This brings us appropriately to the problems of bearing witness or testimony. Historian Annette Wieviorka, in 1998, published a small book entitled L’Ere du témoin, the era of the witness.24 It was dedicated to psychoanalyst Anne-Lise Stern whose long-running seminar at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme as of the 1970s had centred on uncovering the often unconscious but continuing presence of echoes of the Holocaust in contemporary European culture.

Wieviorka opened with the words spoken by Jewish historian Simon Dubnov to his comrades in Riga in December 1941, just before being murdered as part of the liquidation of the ghetto: “Good people, do not forget; good people, tell the story; good people, write!” (9). Not only were numerous written accounts, diaries and so on found buried in the ruins of the ghettos and death camps of Eastern Europe,25 and later rediscovered, but between 1944–1948, the work of the Central Commission of Jewish History in Poland had gathered over 7,000 testimonial accounts from survivors. Raul Hilberg recalled YIVO research director Philip Friedman, who died in 1960, telling him that there

24 Annette Wieviorka, L’ere du témoin (Paris: Plon, 1998). The originator of the idea of an era of testimony was Shoshana Felman’s long essay on Claude Lanzmann’s film Shoah; see her “In an Era of Testimony,” Yale French Studies 79 (1991), 39–81. Felman also suggests Shoah was less a “historical document on the genocide,” and more a “film about witnessing”: its “disorienting vision of the present” re-writes the past “event-without-a-witness into witnessing, into history.”
were by the 1950s some 18,000 writings by survivors, and that those numbers were already out of date (Wieviorka, 9–12). Since then, to manuscripts have been added countless numbers of audio cassettes and tapes, videotapes, CD-ROMs, DVDs, gathered and stocked in numerous archives and libraries in sites throughout the West. Wieviorka remarked that historians had seldom looked at this recorded material, leaving the “gigantic corpus” either to literary scholars, or to diverse psychiatrists (15). Most importantly, all this material provided a “model of the construction of memory”—in other words, “a figure of testimony” (16). These she proposed to investigate in three dimensions: 1) those left by the ones who were killed, 2) how the Eichmann Trial made the emergence of the figure of the witness possible, and 3) how this figure had become society-wide in the sense that one could speak meaningfully of an era of testimony. However, it is important to note that there is no unanimity on the obligation to bear witness.26

But rather than recount her argument, allow me to examine instead the problematic figure of the witness. In French, a “témoin” in its most banal sense is someone who tells what he or she saw, usually to a police officer, or in a courtroom, about an accident or a crime, or gives visual identification of those involved. There are degrees of witnessing and testimony, accompanied by increasing levels of formality: depositions, attestations, etc., in which what is being recounted is written down, transcribed, and signed, all of which serve as guarantees of the veracity of the account. The formalization aspects also increase the stakes, and no doubt reach their pinnacle in the eternal Covenant of G-d with the Jewish people. The Covenant is a legally binding contract, sealed by the Law, the Ark of the Covenant, and the mark of circumcision.

On a very different level, Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg in his 2001 Sources of Holocaust Research classified “testimony” into four categories, noting that the word itself referred to sources that were “highly varied and widely scattered,” and depended on whether the testimony is from a perpetuator, a bystander, or a survivor.27 His four categories were legal testimony, interviews of specific persons, oral history, and “memoir literature.” He raised a number of problems with the testimony of survivors: were they representative of the Jewish community that was destroyed? Were they a random sample of survivors as a whole? Did their testimony reflect a random


27 Raul Hilberg, Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 44.
sample of their experiences? In fact, unless a number of surviving witnesses could testify about a common experience in a specific case—as he noted, such as historian Christopher Browning found in the 134 accounts of shared memory of survivors of the labour camp of Starachowice—Hilberg himself had little use for survivor testimony as a historian. There was simply too much individual variation to guarantee reliability.

But we can leave the historians to the dilemmas of their professional activities, as there are other ways to look at the matter. Besides, we have already sufficiently seen the kinds of crises of veracity that affect the historical profession, and as psychiatrist Dori Laub remarks, it was that very crisis of the profession that led to the move to “history as trauma” (255), and so the shift, for Laub, to psychoanalytic approaches to survivor accounts—that is, taking them as a form of narrative.

As a system of law, Judaism is characterized by a style of legal reasoning and modes of argumentation. As such, these are rhetorical acts that generate figures of discourse. One of these figures is the witness testifying to God’s injustice. As Anson Laytner proposed in his fascinating Arguing With God: A Jewish Tradition:

as God has not acted toward His people as a God should act ... His people have known it. The Jewish literary heritage is replete with laments and dirges, complaints and arguments, all protesting God’s mistreatment of His people.... This history [of Jewish suffering since Roman times, if not long before] has given rise to a unique literature of argument prayers ... that, though rooted in deep faith, nevertheless calls God to task for His Lapses of duty.... [Th]is is the Jewish mode of appealing to God the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court against God the Partner.

As this last sentence makes clear, and drawing on the work of scholars dealing with thought forms and patterns in the Talmud, the 12 different categories of prayer, etc., the main stylistic form of “protest/appeals” that Laytner found in practically every period of Jewish history, was “the law court” pattern of prayer. For a very clear illustration of how the law-court pattern manifests

itself, Laytner analyzed two appeals to God by Moses recounted in Exodus 32: 9–14, and 32: 30–35. The structure of the law-court argument was thus as follows: Address and introductory petition; Defence argument; Petition; Divine response/verdict; Execution and sentence (Laytner, 10–12).

In historical terms, the predominant mode of address here has tended to take the form of prayer/appeal, but this was not always the case, and particularly not in the Holocaust and post-Holocaust period. Laytner specifically discusses “the prose arguments” of Elie Wiesel (214–227). For Wiesel, and in turn reflecting many of the dilemmas of post-Holocaust theology, God was both alive and dead, or was alive but absconded during the Holocaust. Much of the argument relies heavily on the figure of paradox, but certainly one thrust concerned a rejection of the ancient doctrine of “u’mipnei hata’einu”—for our sins, we are punished. That the Holocaust was a form of divine retribution is an utter obscenity for Wiesel. In the absence of God, one’s obligation as a Jew is to one’s fellow human beings, to one’s fellow survivors as well as the millions of others who died, to whose memory one must remain a living witness. Wiesel’s stance, Laytner noted accurately, was one of “defiance” (226): he continued to argue with and question God, even if he was no longer sure that He was there, while still adhering to the Covenant in spite of God. As with Didi-Huberman, his was a philosophical version of the Malgré Tout.

Finally and briefly, sociologist Renaud Dulong looked at the complexities of the notion of the eyewitness. The phenomenon of the witness, he wrote, “is that a narrative is factualized by ... the presence of its narrator in

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31 For a brilliant discussion of Yiddish poetry of the “annihilation,” see Rachel Ertel, Dans la langue de personne (Paris: Seuil, 1993). One can translate the title with two meanings: 1) as a language that itself disappeared in the flames of the Holocaust, but also 2) as the traces left by the annihilated people turned by the Nazis into nothing and nobody: “personne” means both someone and no-one.

32 Renaud Dulong, Le témoin oculaire: les conditions sociales de l’attestation personelle (Paris: Editions de l’EHESS, 1998). Schladow (2007) remarks that “Witnessing is a process of positioning, both specular and active, whereby the subject is constructed in terms of what s/he has seen or experienced. In relaying that experience, not only is the subject positioned in relation to others, the recipient is also positioned to accept/believe or refuse/disbelieve the testimony. The process of witnessing, officially or unofficially, is therefore ineluctable: what has been witnessed cannot be changed for the subject; nor can it be changed for the recipient of the testimony, who essentially can no longer remain neutral. In the Eichmann trial, for instance, both the witnesses and the recipient audience were positioned by the act of relaying testimony – the former, as subjects of the experience; the latter, as judging subjects of Jewish testimony and experience and of Eichmann and the trial itself. Jewish experience could no longer be ignored or discounted, only accepted or refused, creating the conditions for subsequent discourse about Jewish victimhood and the Holocaust.”
regard to the reported event” (1998, 10–11). One is dealing with greater matters than, say, just the communication of information; indeed, for Dulong, these issues opened up yet another new field of sociological research, in the sense that the witness, regarded too often solely in juridical contexts as a kind of recording device, is instead a multi-dimensional phenomenon. However, and largely due to the methods of scientific criticism, all witnessing today has arguably become dubious, but at what cost? Can any living testimony not be debunked by psychology? As well, to the extent that a large part of our daily information comes from the ‘guarantee’ provided by another person, what are the implications for our ordinary interactions in which so much of what we do and think we know relies on unreliable human perceptions and very approximate human memory?

A 2005 collection of essays, edited by Dulong and Carole Dornier, deals frontally with war-related trauma and memory, but as a problem of the aesthetics of witnessing. Any account, in its dual ambition of “telling the truth” and of adequately transmitting experience to others, necessarily entails aesthetic (stylistic and formal) issues that range across the variety of media of expression, from the “high” style of literary writing including poetry, but also includes theatrical representations (of the Rwanda genocide in this collection), as well as films. For example, Emmanuel Finkiel’s 1999 feature film Voyages focuses upon four Jewish women survivors’ experience decades later. Voyages opens with the return of 65-year-old Riwka to what remains of Auschwitz. As in Alain Resnais’ Hiroshima mon Amour whose leitmotif is “Tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima,” Riwka too “ne verra rien d’Auschwitz.”

In the same collection, historian Frédéric Rousseau returns to Jean Norton Cru’s 1929 book, Witnesses: An essay of analysis and critique of the memoirs of combatants published in French, 1915–1928. The book caused a scandal at the time because the story it told so completely flew in the face of the commemorative memory established since the First World War—the heroic sacrifice of the Unknown Soldier, the glory of dying pro patria, but as well of such supposedly realist, antiwar novels as Henri Barbusse’s Le feu (1916). The still unanswered question Norton Cru raised was, “How does one write about war?” Rousseau demonstrated the various stylistic artifices (exaggeration and

35 The script is appended to Dulong and Dornier, along with an interview with Finkiel, 251 ff.
sensationalism, the abuse of local colour such as regional accents, as well as a stylistic verve that said more about the author than those whose experience he was trying to get at) that Norton Cru had denounced in others while using them himself. Rousseau shows that the debate around such questions has gone on for 70 years and specifically raises that of the “fictionalization” of the concentrationary universe violently denounced by some survivors as having made of “the deportation a best-seller” (Rousseau in Dulong and Dornier, 13–14). This leads Rousseau to mention once again the seemingly endless controversy over the mid-1970s American miniseries Holocaust that French writer and critic Alain Finkelkraut had contemptuously called “Love Story in the extermination camps” (cited in Rousseau, 14).37 Finally, Rousseau circles back to Norton Cru’s question of how to write about war, combining this with a second question raised by British historian Eric Hobsbawm in The Age of Extremes (1994): namely, “how does one write about the concentration camps?” For Rousseau, contemporary historian, the two questions today had “become one and the same” (14; emphasis added).

The other side of the coin concerns the social emergence of what Dulong called “new figures of testimony” (17; emphasis added), in the form of the “new type of witness” exemplified by the former soldier or concentration camp returnee, whose testimony is all the more precious as the generations contemporary of the great catastrophes of the twentieth century die out (16).

Their testimony is an essential element of what he terms “a dispositive of vigilance” that permanently reminds us of the murderous outcomes of totalitarian and racist logics. But also they are living reminders of the obscenity of some political positions and slogans; living proof of the lies of Holocaust deniers; and brakes upon our own forgetfulness (16). Or so we can always hope, malgré tout.

37 Much has been written about the Holocaust series at the time of its release and after. Suffice it here to quote historian Peter Novick who observes that the four-part, 9½ hour mini-series over four nights and watched by 100 million Americans imparted “to more Americans [more information] ... than over all the preceding thirty years.” Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 209.