

The Voice of the Holocaust Survivor

A Uniquely Swedish Project

TONY KUSHNER*

University of Southampton, UK

Victoria Van Orden Martinez, *Afterlives: Jewish and Non-Jewish Polish Survivors of Nazi Persecution in Sweden Documenting Nazi Atrocities, 1945–1946*, Linköping Studies in Arts and Science no. 865; Institutionen för historia and Institutionen för kultur och samhälle (Linköping: Linköpings universitet 2023). 278 pp.

In the latter stages of the Second World War itself and immediately after, a range of projects were created to record those who had suffered Nazi racial and political persecution, most of them focused on the Jewish experience of mass murder.¹ The purpose of these projects varied – they were either to act as a memorial to destroyed communities or to provide an evidential base for prosecutions of the perpetrators. Some served both functions. In recent years, scholarly efforts have been made to discover or rediscover these remarkable initiatives which started in the places of murder and then followed the survivors in displaced persons camps and then temporary and permanent places of refuge across Europe and Palestine/Israel. The interest in these early projects reflects a growing sensitivity towards the voice of the victim which was largely missing from the first histories of the Holocaust. These largely focused on the perpetrators and how the "Final Solution" came to be implemented. The authors of these early studies of the Holocaust were, in addition, at best sceptical and more often blatantly dismissive of survivor testimony.²

After discovery/rediscovery of early testimony projects and incorporation of the material gathered as source material into wider studies, a second stage of engagement with the early testimony projects has begun to take place in

* Professor of History; Faculty Opponent.

1. Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York 2012).

2. See, for example, Gerald Reitlinger, *The Final Solution* (London 1953).

the new millennium. Victoria Van Orden Martinez's doctoral thesis is part of this exciting new work using the material collected by the Polish Research Institute (PIZ) based in Lund which collected survivor testimony (both Jewish and non-Jewish) in 1945 and 1946 amongst the 30,000 victims who were sent to Sweden to recuperate. The PIZ archive, which consists of a range of materials – questionnaire interviews, written testimony and some artwork – is now better known as it has been part digitised and translated. It fits into the category of material that had aims both to document for posterity and more immediately construct it for judicial purposes. The resulting PIZ archive is substantial – consisting of over 500 testimonies.

In her close reading of the organisational records of PIZ, Martinez has provided an extremely valuable contribution to the second stage of academic encounters with postwar survivor testimony projects. This stage has required a more reflexive analysis of these collections, exploring who was taking the survivor testimony and the varying approaches that were utilised which reflected different national and methodological traditions and initiatives. Victoria Martinez has provided one of the most detailed and nuanced studies of the contemporaries who carried out the interviews of survivors.

In terms of major conclusions, Martinez makes a convincing case that the PIZ was unique in several ways. First, it documented the experience of both Jewish and non-Jewish Polish survivors who came to recuperate in Sweden in 1945. Of the 30,000 who came, mainly briefly, to Sweden at the end of the war, they were divided equally in numbers between Jewish and non-Jewish survivors. That survivors themselves were responsible for collecting testimony is not unique to the PIZ project, but that they were both Jewish and non-Jewish and both groups interviewed those who were of a different religion/background from themselves was very unusual if unprecedented – even if the majority of the interviews were carried out from within the same group. Martinez convincingly argues that PIZ was an important example of positive and cooperative everyday Jewish/non-Jewish relations amongst Poles in the immediate post-war era. It is one that is a contrast to the general focus which is on the continuing and sometimes violently increasing Polish antisemitism in this period.³ Whilst there was evidence of some antisemitism and tension between Polish Jewish and Polish non-Jewish refugees in Sweden, within the PIZ the evidence suggests largely harmonious collaboration, perhaps reflecting the progressive politics of the latter.

Second, the thesis is an important study of the operation of gender in the gathering of testimony and other survivor documentation - a factor that has

3. Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (Princeton 2006).

largely been missing as an analytical tool in exploring these rich immediate post-war archives. The limited secondary literature and heritage work on the PIZ has focused on the role of Zygmund Lakocinski, a non-Jewish Polish academic and language assistant who had come to Sweden in the 1930s and who was in effect the director of the body and the official link to Lund University which oversaw the project. What Martinez's thesis shows, by avoiding a top-down approach to the PIZ is that the nine survivors employed by it to carry out the testimony collection shaped how the project would run and thereby giving it its uniqueness. In a classic case of being "hidden in plain sight", the role of these female survivors, until the important intervention of this thesis, have been airbrushed out of history. Rather than simply carrying out the interviews, however, the thesis shows the agency of these survivor women, who showed an empathy, understanding and humanitarianism towards those who were being interviewed, producing in the process an inclusive social history. It was one that was largely at odds with the approach of Sture Bolin, a conservative Swedish nationalist at Lund University, who was the academic charged with overseeing the project for the Swedish government and to whom Lakocinski had to report: it grew out of and was part of a 1930s project to keep Swedish intellectuals in meaningful work, the Swedish Labor Market Commission.

Using a framework developed by feminist theorist, Judith Butler, the thesis astutely positions the survivors collecting testimony through PIZ as between their agency as historical actors and as vulnerable through their war experiences and post-war survivor status.⁴ There was a natural affinity between the survivor interviewers and the survivor interviewees and a shared mission to achieve retributive justice and to recover and document the recent traumatic past, with in mind evidence for war crimes trials and also the construction of history.

Using what the author calls a "rhizomatic" approach in which these remarkable fungal organisms connect over distance, transforming in the process, Martinez shows how the collecting of testimony developed even in the short period of PIZ's existence, which was just over one year, ending in autumn 1946.⁵ In those months, PIZ was, the author argues, transformed into a survivor historical commission from its more elitist, top down, origins. Their approach was through "knowledge rooted in experience". This partly related to the types of material collected which expanded in scope. This, the thesis argues, was only partly out of necessity in the latter stage of

4. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal* vol. 40 no. 4 (1988) pp. 519–531.

5. In this respect, the thesis draws especially on Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London 2004).

collecting through the imminent cessation of government funding and also because the survivors were leaving Sweden in large numbers. The survivor employees of PIZ began to accept less formal material which in its later forms involved memoirs and letters, sometimes supplemented by interviews. This expansion was also, however, through the nine survivor employees developing a greater understanding of the nature of testimony, its value and how it could take different shapes without becoming any the less valuable as source information.

Gender relations, forced migrant agency and constructive Jewish/non-Jewish relations thus enabled PIZ to prosper and for it to leave a remarkable legacy in its relatively short existence. At its most formal level it was in the form of a regular journal, *Polak*, the subscriptions to which were gathered by female survivors from their peers. This was written in Polish and reflected the form of Polish nationalism of the intellectual non-Jewish Poles in PIZ, many of whom had been sent to and survived the Nazi concentration camp for women, Ravensbruck.⁶ Although the interview and other archive and artifact collecting was a joint Jewish/non-Jewish enterprise, this was not true of *Polak* which did not include any material from the Polish Jewish refugees in Sweden. In all other respects, however, this was a joint venture and with only a partial ethno-religious division of labour.

Although some material from *Polak* and in the various forms of testimony collected are introduced and subject to close reading, the bulk of the chapters represent a skilful and painstaking trawl through the traces in the PIZ and related archives, again joined up through the rhizome metaphor, of how the survivor collections were produced and who was responsible for them. Whilst there are a few key policy documents that have survived and are used in the thesis, these alone do not explain the dynamics of PIZ. The use of these sparse policy documents alone has led to over emphasising of the role especially of Zygmund Lakoconski and also Sture Bolin and, from this, the ignoring or marginalisation of the nine survivor interviewers. The more detailed research of this thesis allows for a more complex reading of the organisation. Rather than simply mechanically carrying out work that might have been regarded as gender specific division of labour, with men organising and women carrying it out, from these traces, which include comments on the testimony itself and who was to be interviewed, it becomes increasingly apparent through Martinez's careful research that the female survivors played the most important role in the creation of this unique archive. It was thus very different in the power relations reflected in other contemporary Swedish projects, including that of the SDU (Samarbetskommittén

6. Sarah Helm, *Ravensbruck: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (London 2016).

för demokratiskt uppbyggnadsarbete), which utilised only mechanical, top-down questionnaires to gather information from a range of survivors.

In November 1945 Sture Bolin delivered a lecture to the survivor employees of PIZ which outlined how they should carry out interviews. His mechanical and fact-based guide and later memorandum was thus largely ignored by the women survivor interviewers. This proved to be much to the benefit of creating a nuanced and multi-layered archive. Whilst Martinez is candid that this detailed micro-historical approach was not what she intended at the start of her research, the deft archaeology of the archive, or more accurately archives, has revealed as much if not more than a more straightforward investigation of the testimony alone.

Indeed, the evolving and increasingly self-confident approach of PIZ was one which allowed the forced migrants' voice to be heard, encouraged by those who understood their experiences as they had suffered similarly and allowing for and sometimes even encouraging the expression of emotions. It also evolved, according to the author, from bringing in Jewish approaches from survivor testimony work in Poland, again showing the openness and cross-ethnic fluidity of this project.

In her epilogue, Martinez states that in this respect, there is a wider significance of the PIZ project in terms of collecting testimony from contemporary refugees and forced migrants in giving them more space to represent and speak for themselves. Through such means it counters the idea of passivity and the survivors and forced migrants as being objects to whom things are done, evoking at best pity. Giving voice and agency is not necessarily straightforward and the results can be challenging. The example is given at the close of the dissertation of the Museum of Movement proposed for Malmö in 2018 which itself came out of "collaborative emergency ethnography in 2015 to document the experiences of refugees entering Sweden from war torn countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq". In the end this was seen as too challenging and too disruptive and instead energy focused on creating a Swedish Holocaust Museum which, because of the passage of time, was regarded as safer and less difficult. This Swedish heritage development helps us to return to the strength and achievements of Victoria Martinez's thesis. Through time, exploring only the testimony of the survivors would have been the easier and less awkward route to take. By bringing back to the historical record, the role of the survivor interviewers and how they created a shared enterprise with their fellow refugees, both non-Jewish and Jewish, this is a brave and important piece of scholarship in the fields of both Swedish history in which the survivors were part of – though this would have pained Sture Bolin – and the inherently transnational area of Holocaust studies as typified by those who came either temporarily or permanently

from Eastern Europe. In the hands of Victoria Martinez, it has led to a nuanced interrogation of PIZ and the agency and shared enterprise of survivors as interviewers and interviewees in creating it.

Future work will be able to use this thesis as a foundation to interrogate the survivor testimony and related material created by PIZ. Indeed, a start has been made by Victoria Van Orden Martinez in confronting the testimony itself and not just the more institutional part of this archive. Here she follows the approach of Henry Greenspan on focusing on the individual survivor and how testimony is constructed and reconstructed in complex ways.⁷ This is perhaps the way forward with the PIZ archive so that full justice is done to its unique nature – it is, as Martinez makes clear throughout her thesis, not simply an archive that is important because of its size and closeness to the events it describes: each testimony is valuable in its own right. Others may wish to compare further with other immediate postwar testimony projects and also to explore the other sources in this rich archive, including the artifacts and artwork. Any further work on the PIZ will have to begin, however, with Martinez's excellent thesis.

7. Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (New York 1998).