

Introduction

Raphael Vago

“How do you know that we are interested in keeping you alive?” This is how Captain Burădescu, the commanding officer on duty in the Vapniarka concentration camp in Transnistria, replied to a delegation of three inmate physicians who complained on the terrible situation in the camp (in Ștefan’s chapter in this volume).

This volume introduces us to different perspectives and multi-disciplinary aspects of memories of terror in the eyes of survivors as presented and analyzed by the various authors. If there were any dialogues between the perpetrators and victims, the words of Captain Burădescu ran through most of the studies in the volume.

Although there are several studies focusing on Romania (Mihaela Gligor, Sonia Catrina, Eugenia Mihalcea, Olga Ștefan), three of them focusing on the Holocaust in Romania in the killing fields of Transnistria, the other studies offer a wide perspective both in terms of the geographical, topical, and analytical approaches: Katharina Friedla on the less-researched aspects of religious and social life of Polish Jews in the USSR during World War II; Tuvia Friling on the strange life, death, and after-life of Eliezer Gruenbaum/Leon Berger in Auschwitz-Birkenau, a study dealing as a test case “with the complicated, entangled, and fragile ‘relations’ between history, memory, and politics” (a definition that could be applied to some of the other studies in the volume); and Arleen Ionescu’s analysis of Kathy Kacer’s *Shanghai Escape*, a book aimed at a younger readership.

While each of the contributors worked separately and unaware of who the other authors were and what they were writing, the theoretical-contextual apparatus with ample and updated bibliography is common between all the studies. As Mihaela Gligor wrote in her analysis of Saul Steinberg’s view of the world from Palas Street, her topic is one of “cultural memory” and the role

of the “places of memory” (*les lieux de mémoire*), such places figure in various forms in all the studies in the volume. “Memories are delicate”, wrote Gligor in her chapter, but, as is seen in most of the case studies presented in this volume, they are also traumatic. In fact, Saul Steinberg’s case as the emigrant artist is different, because he did not suffer direct trauma, he succeeded in evading it in face of rising danger of anti-Semitism, extremism, fascism, but the memory of Palas Street in Bucharest pursued him in his artistic representation. Gligor analyzes some of Steinberg’s works as related to the “places of memory” by answering the question of how the artist processed the memories of his childhood, of the center of his world – Palas Street in Bucharest – in his works of art.

The politics of memory is evident in several of the studies. The sociopolitical context is very essential in order to understand the memories and aftermath of terror and trauma. Thus, Tuvia Friling’s study, based on his well-known Hebrew and English version of his work on Eliezer Gruenbaum/Leon Berger, the *kapo* from Auschwitz-Birkenau, traces the political implications of this enigmatic story, including his death in battle, or perhaps execution, in Israel’s War of Independence, on the polemics in Israeli society and in the political spectrum linked to Eliezer Gruenbaum’s father, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, the most important secular leader of interwar Poland’s Jewish community and a prominent Israeli politician. The life and death story of Eliezer Gruenbaum, alias Leon Berger, is a fascinating and tragic story. The hero’s road as a communist, anti-Zionist, secularist to his role as a *kapo*, the legacy and the arguments around his behavior and performance there, which is a tragedy in itself on the role and place of the *kapo* in Holocaust historiography, his postwar trial, all present one of the more enigmatic stories of the Holocaust and its memory.

In this category of the politics of memory and the memory of terror belongs Eugenia Mihalcea’s study based on seven interviews conducted between 1983 and 1984 in Israel with children survivors from Transnistria, while it also belongs to the Ro-

manian themes of the volume. In her theoretical discussion she emphasizes, following Kangisser-Cohen, that survivors changed their stories as individual memory is a continuous negotiation and dialogue in time influenced by the sociopolitical context in which the interviewees lived. She is looking in her research at several questions, also evident in Sonia Catrina's study of Miriam Korber-Bercovici's firsthand account of her plight and dehumanization in Transnistria.

Among other essential questions Mihalcea is asking are: "How do they recall the Holocaust? How do they choose to talk about Transnistria? How do they identify themselves as survivors of the Holocaust?" The important part of her study is that they were no longer children when they testified, and that their perception of their own past is in close connection with their experiences over the years that have passed. And in the case of her study, the interviews conducted in 1983 and 1984 reflected the "conspiracy of silence" that existed through the years Israeli society was busy nation building and creating the "new Jew," so that these stories were not heard and people were not interested in hearing them. Mihalcea traces the developing attitudes to the Holocaust in Israel through its various stages, including the shifting of attention to the Holocaust during the Eichmann trial in 1961, which is seen as a turning point in the attitudes in Israel toward the Holocaust. Thus, in her analysis the memories of the trauma are reflected through the personal development and the fate of the survivors in Israel against a background of the shifting shapes of the politics of memory in the young state of Israel.

Sonia Catrina focuses on the diary of Miriam Korber-Bercovici, published in Romania in 1995. Like the other authors of the volume, she provides an ample theoretical introduction on the question of trauma. Korber-Bercovici's diary, like so many diaries and memoirs of the Holocaust, highlights the contrast between life before the tragedy and the trauma of the deportation and its aftermath, the process of dehumanization, and the rapid change

from the vanished past into the tragic present. The analysis of the diary provides a picture of the social and human conditions in her native town, the social categories, the growing radicalization of Romanian society and politics. The vivid descriptions of life before the beginning of the deportations are in the sharpest contrast with the rapid process of dislocation, terror, and dehumanization that the young girl and her family underwent, as she felt that “I was not a human being any more.” The feeling of terror, anxiety, and trauma accompanied the terrible sights she has seen in the various station and locations of her deportation.

Transnistria, the killing field of the Romanian Holocaust, also figures in Olga Ștefan’s study of Vapniarka, one of the most notorious camps in Transnistria. The camp was directly administered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (and not by the authorities of the Transnistria region) and was intended for political prisoners, most of them Jewish. Ștefan analyzes in depth several memoirs written by former inmates and compares the various approaches to the memory of terror conveyed by those former inmates. Most of the inmates were either members of the underground communist movement or leftist activists. What is very clear from the testimonies is the high degree of internal discipline, organization, hierarchy, solidarity, and cooperation that existed between the inmates, which helped enable their survival. Their spiritual well-being was also bolstered by various social activities. The study also reflects, as other studies and testimonies from Transnistria have indicated, the differentiation in the behavior of the Romanian officers and staff, including the camp commanders. In the case of the Vapniarka inmates, as also in other cases, this differentiation was helped via “negotiations” by the inmates with the authorities. At Vapniarka, for example, this involved the inmate physicians and leaders of the inmates. The study also reflects on the memory of Vapniarka in communist historiography, which diminished or ignored the Jewish origins of most of the inmates. There is no doubt that Ștefan’s study adds another compelling aspect to the “Romanian side” of the present volume.

Among the interdisciplinary approaches in the various studies in the volume, Arleen Ionescu's chapter stands out as it combines psychoanalysis and memory and trauma studies, amply quoted and presented in various parts of the text, in order to "explore the traces of the protagonist's memory." Ionescu analyzes Kathy Kacer's *Shanghai Escape*, a book written to be accessible to readers of a younger age. It is a saga of displacement and terror set in the Shanghai Ghetto as seen through the eyes of a young girl from Vienna, Lily Toufar. The story that starts when Lily's family leaves Vienna on the eve of the Kristallnacht, November 8, 1938. From Vienna to Shanghai, and there from one place to another and finally to Toronto, the journey is also one of memories of terror, like that of the Japanese invaders' brutality toward the Chinese people. As Ionescu writes, "she had learned to master her fears of mice and bugs and, in a world in which she witnessed the obliteration of individuals every day and in which death was always present, her fear of death." Based on a true story, *Shanghai Escape* was very well received, and undoubtedly Ionescu's analysis has added a provoking interpretation of young Lily's repression of memory but also of the ways in which she mastered her fears.

Another chapter in the volume that focuses on dislocation and almost impossible journeys is that of Katharina Friedla on the religious and social life of Polish Jews in the USSR during World War II. It aims to "present the trajectories of lives of Polish Jews who remained faithful to their religion in the face of persecution and mass violence in the Soviet Union during World War II." Jewish fate brought Polish Jews as the Szczukowski and Bankir families to baking *matzah* for the Passover holiday, somewhere between Tashkent and Samarkand, after having been exiles by the NKVD to Siberia and then drifted to the Central Asia republics. The saga of religious Polish-Jewish families, running away from the Nazis, for a time persecuted by the Soviet authorities' antireligious policy, is a story of keeping Jewish life and traditions, and developing strategies of not only physical survival but also spiritual one, a topic that that was not very much researched,

as the author pointed out. The preservation and keeping forms of national-religious and social identity is presented in this chapter as a case study in forms of Jewish fate during the war years, as those Polish-Jewish refugees fled from the Nazis, encountered for a time Soviet hostility, many of them ultimately creating in Samarkand a “vibrant center of Jewish religious life.”

As Mihaela Gligor, the editor of the present volume, wrote in her essay on Saul Steinberg, “The manner in which a community relates to the past involves different actions such as connectivity, storage, retrieval, transmission, and (re)interpretation.”

The essays in this volume indeed reflect the various aspects of memories of terror – and of remembering and learning from the past.

Tel Aviv, June 8, 2020