

MEMORIES OF TERROR

Essays on Recent Histories

Edited by

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Introduction

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“How do you know that we are interested in keeping you alive?”, this is how Captain Burădescu, the commanding officer on duty in Vapniarka camp in Transnistria, replied to a delegation of three inmate physicians who complained on the terrible situation in the camp (in Olga Ștefan, *Vapniarka: Personal memories from the “Camp of Death”*).

This volume introduces us to different perspectives and multidisciplinary 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* aimed at a younger readership.

While each of the contributors worked separately, not aware who were the authors and what they are 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 of the volume. "Memories are delicate [...]", wrote Gligor in her Foreword, but they are in most of the case studies presented in this volume 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. Mihaela Gligor analyses 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 social-political context is very essential in order to understand the memories and aftermath of terror and trauma. Thus, Tuvia Friling's study, based on his very 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 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 a Kapo in Holocaust historiography, his post-war 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 taken between 1983-1984 in Israel with children survivors from Transnistria, while it also belongs to the Romanian themes of the volume. In her theoretical discussion she emphasizes, following Kangisser-Cohen, that survivors changed their stories as the individual memory is a continuous negotiation and dialogue in time influenced by the socio-political 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 first hand-account of her plight and dehumanization in Transnistria.

Among other essential questions, Mihalcea is asking “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 taken in 1983-1984 reflected the “conspiracy of silence” through the years while they claimed that Israeli society was busy in its tasks of nation-building and that of a new Jew, while their stories were not heard or people were not so 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 towards 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 on the 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 Germany in 1992, and in Romania in 1995. Like the other authors of the volume, she provides an ample theoretical introduction on the question of trauma. Bercovici’s diary, like so many diaries and memoirs of the Holocaust, highlights the contrast between the 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 in the life before the beginning of the deportations are in the sharpest contrast with the rapid process of dislocation, terror, 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, *Vapniarka: Personal Memories from the “Camp of Death”*. Vapniarka, one of the most notorious camps in Transnistria, directly administered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and not by the authorities of the Transnistria region, was intended for political prisoners, most of them Jewish. Olga Ștefan analyses in depth several memoirs written by former inmates, also by comparing 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 between the inmates which helped their

survival and kept their spiritual well being by various social activities. The study also reflects, what 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 has helped in “negotiations” by the inmates with the authorities, as in the case of Vapniarka, by 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. No doubt that Olga 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 *Traces of Survival in a World of Terror: Kathy Kacer’s Shanghai Escape* 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 protagonist’s memory”. Ionescu analyses Kathy Kacer’s *Shanghai Escape*, written to be accessible to readers of a younger age, a saga of displacement and terror in the Shanghai Ghetto through the eyes of a young girl from Vienna, Lily Toufar, a saga that starts when Lily’s family leave Vienna on the eve of the Krisstallnacht, 8 November 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 towards the Chinese people, and 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, Kathy Tracer’s book was very well received, and no doubt that Ionescu’s analysis 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 Kathrina Friedla on the “religious and Social Life of Polish Jews in the USSR during World War II”; it aims to “present 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 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’ anti-religious 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.