Chapter 1

The Witness to History

Conceptual Clarifications

The Zeitzeugenbörse in Berlin

In 1993, senior citizens of Berlin founded a society called 'Zeitzeugenbörse'.[1] The society is designed to encourage dialogue between the generations. Its primary goal is to make public the memories of its members who, at least during the first years of the society's existence, mostly belonged to the war generation. The Zeitzeugenbörse administers, inter alia, a database of its members, establishes contacts between these members and public institutions looking for a witness to give testimony on a historical event, and organizes seminars to prepare its members for public appearances. Several similar societies have by now been founded in other German cities. The name of the Zeitzeugenbörse is composed of two words: 'Zeitzeuge' and 'Börse'. 'Börse' means stock exchange or, more generally, any kind of exchange market. 'Zeitzeuge' is a relatively new concept consisting of the words 'Zeit', meaning time, and 'Zeuge', meaning witness. In this chapter, I wish to reflect specifically on the concept of 'Zeitzeuge' and the ideas connected to it. I will start by analysing the different uses of the concept in German and will then propose two analytical concepts for this study taking up the meanings of the German 'Zeitzeuge': 'witness of the past' and 'witness to history'. In the second part of this chapter, I will, with reference to the figures of the juridical witness and the martyr, outline some of the characteristics of the figure of the witness to history.

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Witnesses of the Past, Witnesses to History and Video Testimonies

While Germans use the word 'Zeitzeuge', the Dutch talk about 'tijdgetuiger', the Norwegians of 'tidsvitner'[2] and the Swedes of 'samtidsvittner'. All three words specifically designate people who have witnessed a time period or an event of historical importance. In German especially, the concept of 'Zeitzeuge' is now used frequently in everyday speech. The historian Martin Sabrow (2012: 13) observes that 'Zeitzeuge' can be counted amongst those concepts:

> that suddenly appear out of nothing, just in order to be integrated into everyday language so quickly, that they appear to have swallowed their own genealogy and seem to transcend history, as if they had always been there and it becomes impossible to imagine what it was like without them.

Sabrow (2012) traces the first uses of the concept back to the mid 1970s. Nowadays, the term has an entry in the German dictionary *Der Duden*, which defines it as 'sb. who as a contemporary can give testimony on certain occurrences (of historical importance)'. Although the word has been used for objects, such as in the title of Rosmarie Beier-de Haan and Gottfried Korff's (1992) study *Zeitzeugen: Ausgewählte Objekte aus der Sammlung des Deutschen Historischen Museums* (*Zeitzeugen: Selected Objects from the Collection of the German Historical Museum*), it is generally used to designate people.

As the *Duden* definition shows, the German concept 'Zeitzeuge' combines the idea of having witnessed something in situ with that of giving testimony *ex post facto*. 'Zeitzeuge' can designate an individual who has merely witnessed an event, or the person who both witnesses and gives testimony of this event. Up to this point, no English equivalent has been defined. A literal translation would result in something like 'time-witness'. For my analysis of the musealization of video testimonies, I will use the concept 'witness of the past' when referring to the first meaning of the German 'Zeitzeuge'. Witnesses of the past are people who have witnessed – in the sense of having seen, heard or experienced – an event of historical importance. Witnesses of the past have 'been there' and their bodies are – visibly or invisibly – marked by the events that they witnessed. I will use the concept 'witness to history' when referring to the second meaning of the German 'Zeitzeuge'. Witnesses of the past become witnesses to history once they give testimony of their experiences in a public

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space in which their addressees intentionally go beyond the circle of their friends and family. Witnesses to history willingly or unwillingly construct or consolidate a certain narrative of the past – a certain history.

There are numerous fora in which the testimonies of witnesses to history can be made public: talks in front of school classes, talk shows, conferences, TV documentaries, newspaper articles, autobiographies, more recently websites and online platforms such as YouTube or Facebook, and of course museums. The medium for public presentation that I will be analysing here comes in the form of videotapes on which the testimonies of the witnesses to history have been recorded. German studies generally talk of 'Zeitzeugenvideos' (videos of witnesses to history) or 'Videozeugnisse' (video testimonies), while in English we find alongside the concept 'video testimony' that of 'visual history'. The USC Shoah Foundation, for example, calls its archive the 'Visual History Archive'. 'Visual history'[3] used in this sense makes reference to oral history and concentrates on the medium used to record the testimonies. It describes oral historians' use of videotapes instead of audiotapes. The term 'video testimony' on the other hand refers to the content of the videos. It was first used by the collaborators of the Fortunoff Archive. They had, in fact, decided early on to use the term 'testimony' instead of the term 'interview'. Joanne Weiner Rudof (2009: 59–60), one of the collaborators, explains that:

> right from the beginning it was clear that the existing vocabulary was not suited to describe the process. The use of words like 'interview' and 'interviewer' would have generated a wrong impression. The founders, looking well ahead, decided on the concept of testimony in order to express more clearly the dimensions of the process.

For the Fortunoff Archive, it is thus the speech act recorded on video that is of importance – an act that they call testimony. The use of the term 'testimony' expresses, first, the idea that the Holocaust survivors who appear in these videos do not only tell their life stories, but that they also testify to the past. The term refers, second, to the 'testimonial' character of the videos. Geoffrey Hartman (1996: 140) of the Fortunoff Archive observes that most of the video testimonies of Holocaust survivors are also 'testimonial videos': the testimonies are also given in the name of the family members and, more generally, the millions who were murdered. If we consider this second meaning, the concept of video testimony could only be used with reference to survivors of catastrophes and massacres. Not all of the videotaped testimonies that I will be analysing in this study are testimonies of Holocaust survivors. I opt for the concept of video testimony

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nevertheless. For one thing, by using the concept of video testimony, I want to stress the genealogy of video testimonies as a medium that was first used for recording the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. On the other hand, I wish to underline that video testimonies are always used to testify to a certain narrative of the past – to a certain history – regardless of whether they are based on the testimonies of Holocaust survivors or on those of other witnesses to history. However, before turning to the characteristics of the witness to history, let us turn to those of the paradigmatic witness figure: the juridical witness.

The Juridical Witness and the Witness to History

The etymological origins in Latin and in old Germanic languages of the words denoting both the act of witnessing and the witness can be located in a juridical context. The English word witness goes back to the Old High German 'gawitzi', 'gewizzi' or 'gewizze' and the Middle High German 'gewizze', which in turn have developed from the Latin 'cum' (together) and 'scientia' (knowledge). Witness therefore has the same roots as the English 'conscience' and the German 'Gewissen' (conscience). The German word 'Gewissen' in turn is used to mean in the first instance 'cognizance' and in the second instance 'awareness of that which is proper', as well as 'inner consciousness' (Paul 1992: 262). The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as its first entry a now obsolete meaning for witness: 'knowledge, understanding, wisdom'. The witness is thus somebody who knows something, but also somebody who is aware of the moral consequences of her or his knowledge. Passing from the abstract to the concrete, the witness used to mean 'attestation of a fact, event, or statement' and the 'evidence given in a court', as well as 'the action or condition of being an observer of an event'. The word 'witness' was only eventually used to designate a person 'who gives evidence in relation to matters of fact under inquiry'. Here it first designated the third party present at the signing of a document or a transaction.

The German word for witness, 'Zeuge', goes back to the Old High German 'giziugon' and the Middle High German 'ziugen', meaning 'producing through technical activity'. The meaning of 'zeugen' as giving testimony might go back to this first meaning and denote the act of putting forth facts in court. As with the oldest uses of the Anglo-Saxon witness, the Germanic 'Zeuge' used to denote the evidence given in court, the court witness and the third party present at the signing of a contract (Paul 1992: 825–26). The origins of the Anglo-Saxon 'testimony' as well as, for example, the French 'témoin' or the Italian 'testimone' can, according to

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Giorgio Agamben (2002: 17), be found in the Latin 'testis', signifying 'the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party (*terstis)'.

Those etymological origins (being an observer, producing knowledge and conscience) find their reflections in the functions of the juridical witness. In fact, reflections on the act of witnessing and of giving testimony generally start with reflections on the roles of the juridical witness (cf. Peters 2001; Assmann 2006: 85–92; Krämer 2008). The philosopher Sibylle Krämer (2008: 228) defines five ideal-type characteristics of the juridical witness: the creation of evidence, perception, the speech act, the audience and trustworthiness.

First, during a trial, the juridical witness provides information that cannot be acquired in another way. She or he produces evidence. The juridical witness allows the victim to obtain justice and the perpetrator to be punished. Ultimately her or his testimony helps to renew a social balance that has been damaged (Krämer 2008: 228–29).

Second, one of the preconditions for becoming a juridical witness is that the person in question has directly perceived the event to which she or he bears testimony, at best without having actively taken part in it. The juridical witness is ideally a neutral recipient of information that she or he reproduces objectively. Any interpretation, judgement or opinion on the event under scrutiny that a witness might utter can damage her or his trustworthiness as a juridical witness (Krämer 2008: 229–30).

Third, juridical witnesses have to put their perceptions into words. Being a witness means performing a speech act, while giving testimony in court is a ritual. The witness is positioned in a witness-stand, facing the judge, who represents the interests of the community under whose auspice the trial takes place, and is flanked by the prosecution and the defence representing in their turn the interests of the accused and the law. The testimony that the witness gives is framed and conditioned by the oath that is foregrounded at the beginning of the act of giving testimony and by the questions of both the defence and the prosecution. It is the ritual of the trial that turns individuals into juridical witnesses and defines their testimony as trustworthy. Being a juridical witness is ultimately a part that has to be performed (Krämer 2008: 231).

Fourth, at the same time as being a speech-act, giving testimony is a 'listening-act'. Witnesses can only give testimony in front of an audience. A trial is a dialogue and the testimonies of juridical witnesses are conditioned and steered by this dialogue (Krämer 2008: 231–32).

Fifth, a precondition for an individual to be accepted as a juridical witness is that this individual be trusted by the audience at the trial. An

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individual who seems untrustworthy – even if she or he might be telling the truth – cannot serve as a juridical witness (Krämer 2008: 232–33).

These five characteristics are archetypal characteristics. They only rarely correspond to the real situation of bearing witness in court. Any testimony is fallible, and this fallibility, as Sibylle Krämer points out, goes back to the very simple fact that juridical witnesses are humans. Humans are not disinterested recipients, but people with feelings and their own sense of judgement who are prone to forget what might be of importance for the resolution of the case under scrutiny. Moreover, since words can be exchanged, but emotions and impressions first need to be put into words in order to be transferable to another person, there is necessarily a gap in correspondence between the testimony given by the witness and the reception of this testimony by those who are listening to the testimony. The figure of the juridical witness is thus caught in a constant dialectic between what Krämer (2008: 238, italics in original) calls its '*Subjekt*stellung' (subject character) – the quality of being human – and its 'Sach- und Objektstatus' (status as an object) – its function as a means towards the resolution of a criminal case.

I have stated that I will use the concept 'witness to history' in order to designate individuals who give testimony of a past event in a public space. This space can, of course, also be the courtroom. As I will show in Chapter 2, the Eichmann trial that took place in Jerusalem in 1961 can be considered as the birthplace of the figure of the witness to history. The figure of the witness to history, as I understand it here, takes its legitimacy and many of its characteristics from the juridical witness. In what follows, I will try to give an overview over these characteristics. In doing so, I will follow the five ideal-type characteristics proposed by Krämer and will show how these characteristics are extended and distorted in the case of the witness to history.

Unlike for the juridical witness, it is impossible to define an archetypal case of the witness to history. This is due to the fact that, unlike the juridical witness, the witness to history does not need to fulfil a clear function. The functions of witnesses to history are defined by the settings in which the individual witnesses appear. As we will see, in the particular case of the use of video testimonies in the museum setting, witnesses to history can variably serve as providers of historically relevant information, in order to reinforce the authenticity of other objects in the museums, in order to affect visitors, as a means for moral education or, most frequently, as a combination of all of the above. The multiplicity of functions performed by witnesses to history leads, second, to a proliferation of individuals who could potentially perform the role of witness to history. Individuals who would never be considered for the role of juridical witness can become

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witnesses to history. Witnesses to history can be victims, perpetrators or bystanders, members of the population who witnessed crimes but did not intervene (Hilberg 1992). They can have held a leading position or merely have observed certain events. They can have been active or passive, willingly or unwillingly involved. Nevertheless, while being diverse, witnesses to history also share some characteristics.

If the primary function of the juridical witness is evidence production, the primary function of the witness to history is education. Under the heading 'Zeitzeuge werden' (becoming a witness to history), the Zeitzeugenbörse advances the following definition on its website: 'We are all of us witnesses to history because we all have experiences, and collect memories that might enlighten other people.'[4] The role of a witness to history is to give new insights to those who listen to her or his testimony. The educative role of witnesses to history can thereby serve different ends: it can be cognitive, providing the audience with information that they did not have before the encounter; it can be affective, making them respond emotionally in a way in which they have not responded before; it can be an end in itself, making the audience discover historical details that it did not know before; and it can be a means to an end, for example, when this historical knowledge is used in peace and human rights education. Most often, we find a combination of those four functions.

The second characteristic of the juridical witness, her or his physical presence at the event on which they are giving testimony, is intensified for the witness to history. In the case of the juridical witness, hearsay is accepted, although presence in time and space is preferred. In the case of the witness to history, presence in time and space is crucial. In his reflections on the figure of the witness, Geert Gooskens (2011: 155, italics in original) underlines that 'witnesses are *living traces* of the things that they have experienced': '*Through the witness we are not only looking for information on an event, we are rather looking for contact with this event*' (2011: 154, italics in original). The knowledge that witnesses to history provide their audience with always refers to a past event that is inaccessible for the audience. Through contact with the witness to history, the audience also tries to get in contact with the event in question. It is this presence in time and space that distinguishes the witness to history from the expert. As I will show in greater detail in Chapter 4, the witness to history who, unlike the historian, might only know little about the same event's political and historical background is imbued with an aura of authenticity. She or he has the bonus of seemingly knowing what it 'was really like and what it felt like'. Therefore, the closer to the core of the event that the witnesses have been, the more valuable their testimonies are.

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Third, as with juridical witnesses, witnesses to history have to put their experiences into words. While for juridical witnesses, the verbalization takes place in the highly institutionalized and ritualized setting of the court, witnesses to history verbalize their experiences in a variety of settings. Their testimonies, while not being completely free from set structures, are therefore less ritualized than the testimonies of juridical witnesses. Unlike in the case of the juridical witness, the subject character (Krämer 2008: 238) of the witness to history is well accepted; it is not only acceptable, but even desirable for witnesses to history to reflect on and to give their own interpretations of what they have experienced. Nevertheless, while giving their testimonies, witnesses to history might make reference to other ritualized or institutionalized forms of narrating, such as court hearings, but also curricula vitae, TV interviews or the genre of written autobiographies. The Zeitzeugenbörse even develops and provides tools and skills for its members to give testimony in front of different audiences. As I will show in Chapter 3, the genre of video testimony has been standardized and ritualized over the years, and both the interviewers and the interviewees have internalized its rules.

Fourth, similar to the juridical witness, witnesses to history need an audience. It is this audience that turns witnesses of the past into witnesses to history. When the Zeitzeugenbörse observes that 'we are all of us witnesses to history because we all of us have experiences, and collect memories that might enlighten other people', it only tells half of the story. It is true that we are all of us constantly experiencing things and collecting memories. However, it is only in hindsight that the importance of an experience becomes apparent. In the case of the juridical witness, it is the juridical case under investigation that defines what experiences, and what details thereof, are relevant – which ones the witnesses should have remembered and which ones they might as well have forgotten. In the case of witnesses to history, it is an audience composed of what Marianne Hirsch (2008) has called the 'generation of postmemory' – the generation of children and grandchildren of the witnesses of the past – that decides which stories it wants to hear and which ones it finds of little interest. Therefore, while all of us are witnesses of the past, observing and experiencing things, only some of us become witnesses to history: those who meet with an audience interested in their testimony. A story that a witness of the past might consider to be important and interesting might not be received by others as such. Other issues, of which both the witnesses to history and their potential audience know that they are extraordinary, might be silenced for political reasons. Witnesses of the Ukrainian Holodomor or the massacre of Polish intellectuals in Katyn, for example, have only recently met

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with a benevolent audience. Other witnesses to history again might only realize the importance or extraordinariness of an experience that they have made if somebody else points them towards it. When Sigmund Kalinski, a Holocaust survivor interviewed by the Shoah Foundation, is asked by the interviewer what he experienced during his time in the ghetto in Bochnia, he, to the surprise of his young interviewer, replies:

> What have I experienced … I have worked in the workshops and was happy and glad that I was at home with my mother. Eh … that there were again and again … eh … let's say excesses of the SS, that was so much my daily bread, that thereon one did not … it simply was that way.

For the young interviewer, life in the ghetto appears to be the epitome of extraordinariness of which every detail should have been recorded for future generations. He expects a story; Sigmund Kalinski does not have one to tell. We do not usually remember much about what we are doing on a day-to-day basis. For Kaliniski, his memory of his time in the ghetto was one of everyday life – though an everyday life in which violence had become normal. It has been remembered – and forgotten – as such.

The audience of witnesses to history in itself can be subdivided into a primary active audience, an intended secondary audience and a real secondary audience. Only very few witnesses of the past give testimony out of their own initiative. In general, they are invited or convinced to do so by the primary active audience. This primary active audience is relatively small and elitist. It consists of interviewers, publishers, museum professionals, oral historians or documentary filmmakers. The primary active audience enters into direct contact with the witnesses and offers them the platforms on which they can narrate their life stories. It is this audience that receives the most complete story. In the case of the production of video testimonies, the primary active audience sees, for example, how the witnesses are acting when the camera is turned off. It might meet the witnesses' family and partners and visit their homes. It is this primary audience that, sometimes in collaboration with the actual witnesses to history and sometimes without them, decides on the parts of the testimonies that will be transmitted to an intended secondary audience and on the form that this transmission will take. In the first instance, the intended secondary audience comprises everybody who could potentially receive the witnesses to history's testimony. The hope of the primary active audience and the witnesses to history is of course generally that as many people as possible will do so, though they might keep access to the testimonies limited. Besides this very large intended secondary audience, a target secondary audience is usually defined. For the case of the presentation of video testimonies in museums,

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this target secondary audience might, for example, consist of school classes or of the local population. The real secondary audience consists of the people who actually watch a video testimony, read an autobiography, visit a museum or watch a documentary. This real secondary audience can be very small. Considering the very large amount of video testimonies that have been recorded over recent years, it might be fair to suggest that most of those testimonies will never have an audience that extends beyond the actual interviewers and the camerawomen and cameramen.

In the case of video testimonies in museums – as indeed for most forms of presentation of the testimonies of witnesses to history – it is very difficult to make out the real secondary audience. Even if the number of people visiting a museum over a certain time period were known, it would still be necessary to discover how many of the visitors actually watched the video testimonies. This study is based on the observations of one member of the real secondary audience, albeit probably an unrepresentatively interested and concerned one: me. Using the interviews that I have conducted and conversations that I have had with curators and filmmakers, I will also look at the primary audience's intentions. As we will see more in detail in Chapters 3 and 5, the concepts of 'secondary witness' (Baer 2000; Wake 2013) and 'tertiary witness' (Wake 2013) have been used in order to describe the secondary audiences in the case of testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Both concepts work not only in a descriptive but also in a prescriptive way, stressing that the act of listening to the testimonies of survivors carries with it a moral obligation of actively engaging with those testimonies and passing them on to future generations.

Fifth, as in the case of the juridical witness, trustworthiness plays an important role in the decision of who can give testimony as a witness to history. 'My attitude toward a potential witness often is prior to my attitude toward her testimony', observes the philosopher Avishai Margalit (2002: 180). There are always some witnesses whose testimony we are at best sceptical of and at worst disbelieve: 'Our knowledge forces us to create a hierarchy of witnesses, indeed to create many hierarchies: different people we trust and mistrust with respect to different things' (Margalit 2002: 181). As I have observed above, individuals who would not qualify as juridical witnesses can become witnesses to history. To a certain extent, whether witnesses to history appear as trustworthy or not depends on the setting that they appear in, on the function that they perform and on the audience for their testimony. Nevertheless, a hierarchy of trustworthiness can be observed. Today, on a scale from trustworthiness to untrustworthiness, victims generally come first, bystanders second and perpetrators third (acknowledging, it should be added, pre-existing hierarchies within these

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three categories). What is more, those who have been closest to the sphere of action are also those who are considered to provide their audience with the most accurate knowledge. This has not always been the case. As I will show in the next chapter, victims were for a long time considered to be untrustworthy because they were deemed to be too emotionally involved.

To summarize: the testimonies of witnesses to history, whatever their nature, have a didactic goal, the presence in time and place of the witnesses is crucial, the speech act of the testimonies of the witness to history is only loosely defined but makes reference to other public speech acts, and being a witness to history is a role that is accorded by an audience composed of members of the generation of postmemory that decides whose testimony it finds most trustworthy. Over the course of this study, I will look more in detail at these characteristics. In Chapter 3, I will for example analyse the exact nature of the speech act that is the act of giving testimony for video testimonies. In Chapters 4 and 5, I will scrutinize the kind of knowledge that is transmitted with the help of video testimonies in museums and will examine the choices that are made by the primary active audience with respect to how witnesses to history are formally represented in exhibitions.

The Martyr and the Witness to History

Most (but not all) of the video testimonies analysed in this study are video testimonies with Holocaust survivors. Reflections on the acts of witnessing and giving testimony on the Holocaust often make reference to another witness figure as well: the martyr (Derrida 2000; Peters 2001; Agamben 2002; Margalit 2002; Assmann 2006: 85–92; Krämer 2008; Schmidt 2010). ‘Martys’ (μάρτυς) is the Greek word for witness. In Christian theology, the martyr is the persecuted Christian who testifies to the existence of God with her or his death. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2002: 26ff) observes that the doctrine of martyrdom was invented by the first Church Fathers in order to defend what to some heretics seemed like senseless death. In pointed contrast to the heretic refusal to believe that God can want the death of innocent believers, the Church Fathers referred to Luke 12:8–9 and Matthew 10:32–33: ‘Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven’.

Unlike juridical witnesses, martyrs have not experienced that to which they testify. They testify to a truth that they are convinced of but cannot

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personally verify: their belief. While the medium of the juridical witness' testimony is the spoken word, the medium of the martyr's testimony is death. Unlike the juridical witness, the martyr is both victim and witness. She or he is not an uninvolved observer, but the target of violence. The martyr therefore needs a second party to witness her or his martyrdom and to testify to it, as Aleida Assmann observes (2006: 88). Without this secondary witness who interprets the martyr's death as martyrdom – and thus a testimony to God – the martyr's death would remain meaningless. These secondary witnesses[5] are 'by no means an epiphenomenon of martyrdom; it is they who first interpret the religious message, write it down and develop it into a story that serves as the foundation of communities of faith' (Assmann 2006: 88). Martyrdom thus always involves two witness figures: the martyr who testifies to her or his belief by means of her or his death; and the secondary witness who interprets the martyr's death as a religious testimony and passes on its story. The interpretation of the death of an individual as martyrdom in turn is ultimately about giving meaning to what would otherwise be senseless suffering.

The suffering of the victims of the Holocaust has often been interpreted as martyrdom: both the death of the victims and the survival of the survivors have been given a religious, political or didactic meaning. The most obvious interpretation of the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust as martyrdom is probably put forward by Yad Vashem, 'the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' [but not victims'] remembrance authority'. As we will see, according to the museal narrative of Yad Vashem, the martyrdom and heroism of the victims of the Holocaust consisted both in active armed resistance and in upholding Jewish identity in the most adverse conditions. This resistance and sacrifice, which found its continuation in the first war of independence, ultimately led to the creation of the State of Israel.

Also in the circles of political prisoners, suffering and death in the concentration camps has been interpreted as martyrdom. In particular, the official propaganda of socialist regimes represented the murder of those persecuted by the Nazi regime as the heroic death of the antifascist resistance fighters (cf. Knigge (1998) for the case of the Buchenwald Memorial). Such interpretations were also shared by associations of former political prisoners in Western European states. Thus, on an audioguide in the Neuengamme Memorial, parts of a speech given by the founder of the 'Amicale Internationale de Neuengamme' Jean-Aimé Dolidier, a trade unionist, can be listened to. Dolidier observes that the prisoners have died in order to free the world from Nazism.

In religious Jewish circles, the attempt to give meaning to suffering had already begun while the persecution was going on. This persecution

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was integrated into a longer history of Jewish suffering. In his semi-autobiographical novel *Fatelessness*, Imre Kertész (2004: 20) describes a conversation between the fourteen-year-old first-person narrator György and his uncle shortly before György gets arrested and is ultimately sent to several concentration camps:

> 'You too', he said, 'are now a part of the shared Jewish fate', and he then went on to elaborate on that, remarking that this fate was one of 'unbroken persecution that has lasted for millennia', which the Jews 'have to accept with fortitude and self-sacrificing forbearance', since God has meted it out to them for their past sins, so for that very reason from Him alone could mercy be expected, but until then He in turn expects of us that, in this grave situation, we all stand our ground on the place He has marked out for us 'in accordance with our strengths and abilities'.

György does not understand the religious meaning that his uncle gives to his suffering. He is confronted with it again later, in Zeitz Concentration Camp, when he observes a group of Latvian orthodox Jews: 'They can be seen everywhere, at work, while marching or at Appell, rocking rhythmically back and forth as they unflaggingly mutter their prayers to themselves, like some unrepayable debt' (Kertész 2004: 139). György feels awkward in their presence: 'as if there had been something not quite right about me, as if I did not quite measure up to the proper ideal, in short as if I were somehow Jewish' (Kertész 2004: 139).

A modern, more positive interpretation of Jewish suffering as martyrdom has been advanced by the Jewish theologian Daniel Krochmalnik (2007). Krochmalnik puts the Holocaust into a Jewish memorial tradition proposing a Haggadah of the Shoah similar to the Haggadah of Passover. The Haggadah of Passover is a religious text read out during the Passover Seder, the ritual dinner marking the beginning of the Passover feast. With the Haggadah of Passover, the memory of the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt is passed on from one generation to another. In this way, the Jewish commandment 'to tell your son' is fulfilled. As a model for a Haggadah of the Shoah, Krochmalnik (2007: 29) proposes the Jewish philosopher Eliezer Berkovitz's *With God in Hell* (1979), where:

> The concentration camp becomes a set and the barracks, the latrines, the whipping post, the gallows and the chimneys become props for the triumph of the eternal people. This play depicts the heroic deeds of the Jewish martyrs who divide and share their bread during famine, who on a fast day gladly relinquish their ration and who, on religious holidays, carry the light into their dark huts. The Germans share the fate of the ancient Egyptians – they are reduced to socage overseers, adamant persecutors and finally victims of a plague sent by God.

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In Krochmalnik's propostion of a Haggadah of the Shoah, survival of the Holocaust becomes an act of divine benevolence similar to the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt. However, more than the survival of individual victims, it is for Krochmalnik (2007: 29) the foundation of the State of Israel that appears as a divine wonder. The Jews who managed to observe their religious practices even under the most hostile circumstances become martyrs, observing the Jewish precept to testify to the existence of God. Krochmalnik (2007: 30) acknowledges that his proposition might contradict actual testimonies, but underlines that it 'corresponds to the main concern of Jewish testimony: not the perpetrators, but the victims, the witnesses and justice have the final word'.

The wish to give a meaning to death at the hands of the Nazi mass murderers can also be found in the concepts that have been defined to describe this death: 'Holocaust', 'Shoah' and 'Hurban'. The term 'Holocaust' was originally used in the Bible to describe burnt offerings. Giorgio Agamben (2002: 28, italics in original), who highlights the senselessness of the death of the victims of the Holocaust, argues that, just like the Church Fathers' interpretation of martyrdom as a divine command, the term 'Holocaust' 'arises from [the] unconscious demand to justify a death that is *sine causa* – to give meaning back to what seemed incomprehensible'. The Hebrew 'Shoah' and the Yiddish 'Hurban' take up the religious interpretation of the mass murder of the European Jews as part of a longer history of persecution and divine punishment. 'Shoah' means destruction. Before it came to describe the mass murder of the European Jews, the word 'Shoah' had been used to denominate divine punishment (Agamben 2002: 31). 'Hurban' used to describe the destructions of the temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians and by the Romans. Especially in orthodox Jewish circles, the murder of the European Jews is interpreted as a third Hurban (Young 1993: 249). Rather than being seen as unique and as a civilizational break (Diner 1988), as is often the case in lay circles, the Holocaust is here seen as one event of extreme suffering among others that God has inflicted upon the Jewish people. Shoah and Hurban are therefore normally used in order to refer exclusively to the Jewish victims, whereas Holocaust is often used more generally to designate all of the victims of the Nazi genocide. I will therefore use the concept of 'Holocaust' rather than those of 'Shoah' or 'Hurban' for this study.

Giving a meaning to death is only one strategy that has been adopted to deal with the enormity of the Holocaust. Another strategy has been to give a meaning to survival. Many Holocaust survivors saw and see their testimony as a moral obligation that comes with their survival. Thus, Elie

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Wiesel (2006: vii), in the introduction to the latest English-language edition of *Night*, observes:

> There are those who tell me that I survived in order to write this text. I am not convinced … However, having survived, I needed to give some meaning to my survival … In retrospect, I must confess that I do not know, or no longer know, what I wanted to achieve with my words. I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer – or my life, period – would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory.

Similarly, for Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz* (1996: 9), giving testimony – sharing his experiences with others – has been an elementary need: 'The need to tell our story to "the rest", to make "the rest" participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse.' Ruth Klüger in *weiter leben* (1994: 142) polemically elects the Germans as the target audience whose conscience she wants to arouse:

> For whom do I actually write this? … I write it for those who do not want to or are not able to feel neither with the perpetrators nor with the victims and for those who think that it is typically unwholesome to read too much about the misdeeds of mankind. I write it for those who think that I emit an insurmountable strangeness. In other words, I write it for Germans.[6]

Survival, these writers suggest, brings with it a moral obligation to give testimony. Even if death might have been meaningless, survival cannot be. Aleida Assmann, with reference to Avishai Margalit (2002: 147ff), therefore even goes so far as to give Holocaust survivors the role of 'moral witnesses'. For Assmann, the moral witness shares characteristics both with the juridical witness, with the martyr and with what she calls the 'historical witness', the messenger in Greek mythology. Like the juridical witness, the moral witness has a mission of truth. This mission is directed against the perpetrators' attempts to conceal their deeds. Like martyrs, moral witnesses embody the crimes that they have been a victim of. It is their marked bodies that serve as substitutes for the juridical oath. Those marked bodies are in fact of a higher importance than the factual accuracy of their testimony. However, unlike martyrs, moral witnesses do not give testimony through their death, but because of their survival. Unlike the martyr, the moral witness does not announce a positive message, God's existence, but instead testifies 'to evil per se, which he experienced himself' (Assmann 2006: 88). The moral witness combines in herself or himself the characteristics of the martyr and those of the secondary witness to

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the martyr or the historical witness (Assmann 2006: 88ff). Through her or his testimony, the moral witness performatively brings about a moral community that does not have a concrete shape or institution (Assmann 2006: 90f). This moral community in turn takes up a discourse that was begun in the courtroom during the trials against the perpetrators, but 'that can only be worked through in fragments and imperfectly by the means of criminal prosecution' (Assmann 2006: 90). For Assmann (2006: 91), giving testimony is therefore a moral imperative: 'Forgetting protects the perpetrators and weakens the victims, which is why remembering in the form of giving testimony has become an ethical obligation and a form of retroactive resistance.'

To create a moral community is, as I will show in the following chapters, one of the most desired goals of the use of video testimonies in exhibitions. Human rights and ethics are now an important part of the didactics of all Holocaust and Second World War exhibitions. One of the main messages that Holocaust and Second World War exhibitions want to communicate is 'never again'. However, not all Holocaust survivors are ipso facto moral witnesses. If I prefer here to use the concept 'witness to history' instead of the concept 'moral witness', this is because I believe the concept of 'moral witness' does not give full credit to the exact nature and functions of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. First, I understand the concept of 'moral witness' to put too much pressure on the individual Holocaust survivor. The interpretation of testimony as an ethical duty puts all of those Holocaust survivors who decided not to give testimony – the majority in fact – into moral debt. If we take Assmann's concept of the moral witness to its limits, then the decision of Holocaust survivors not to give testimony entails a betrayal of their survival.

Second, I take the concept of 'moral witness' to concentrate too much on the agency of the figure of the moral witness and not enough on that of the audience. More than the moral witness creating a moral community, it is the witness' audience that creates the moral witness. A Holocaust survivor can only issue a moral message if her or his primary audience presents her or his testimony in a way in which the secondary audience can – and does – interpret it from a moral perspective. As we will see, the testimonies of Holocaust survivors also meet with an audience that interprets them as anything but moral messages; for example, video testimonies are used by right-wing extremist groups to transmit revisionism and hate messages.

Finally, the concept of 'moral witness' disregards the fact that the functions of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors surpass merely giving moral lessons. With their testimonies, witnesses to history also, and probably most importantly, construct and consolidate a certain narrative of the

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past. In fact, as I will show in Chapter 3, although it was always in the back of the interviewers' minds, not all video testimonies with Holocaust survivors were recorded with the primary goal of giving a moral lesson to the secondary audience.

Interpreting death during the Nazi mass murder as martyrdom and/or survival as a moral obligation is ultimately a question of political positioning. It is a question of the starting point for representation. Yad Vashem's insistence on martyrdom and heroism is also a consequence of the fact that the institution puts the fate of the victims into the centre of its representation. As we will see, many Western European museums start their interpretation with the deeds of the perpetrators. The aim is here not so much to show the heroism of the victims, but the enormity and senselessness of the suffering caused by the perpetrators. An interpretation of suffering as martyrdom would call this senselessness into question. The use of video testimonies in all of these museums has an educational function. The witnesses to history are in this way given a moral role. However, this role is not necessarily coterminous with a moral obligation that comes with survival. In the interview projects, the wish of witnesses of the past not to give testimony was unilaterally accepted.

Conclusion

Although most of the witnesses to history whose video testimonies I will analyse in this study are Holocaust survivors, I will also consider video testimonies with bystanders and members of the local population. The personal experiences and the traces that those experiences have left of course differ from one witness to history to another. The fate of somebody who, like Emilio Jona in the Museo Diffuso, spent the war years as a refugee in a mansion in the countryside can scarcely be compared to that of an Auschwitz survivor. However, this does not mean that the testimonies of both cannot and would not be used in similar ways and that both are part of the global assemblage of the musealization of video testimonies. The concepts of 'witness to history' and 'witness of the past' will allow me to analyse the process of giving testimony of the past and the use of this testimony in a public domain, without – in a first instance – considering the differences in the experiences of the different witnesses. These differences do of course play a role in the actual representation of witnesses to history in exhibitions, but they are secondary to the phenomenon of the musealization of video testimonies that is under scrutiny here. The next chapter will look at how the process of becoming a witness to history has changed

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over the years. It will analyse the foundations of the musealization of witnesses to history. Looking at public history and academic scholarship, it will answer the questions why and how witnesses to history have become authoritative representatives of the past.

Notes

1. The website of the Zeitzeugenbörse can be found at: http://www.zeitzeugen-boerse.de.
2. Until the 1970s, the term 'sannhetsvitner' (witnesses of truth) was used in Norway. The term 'tidsvitner' is a direct translation from the German 'Zeitzeuge', which was introduced by Helga Arntzen of the Norwegian foundation 'Hvite Busser til Auschwitz', which organizes study tours for schoolchildren to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum (Kverndokk 2011: 156). In 2006, Jakob Lothe and Anette Homlong Storeide published the book *Tidsvitner – Fortellinger fra Auschwitz og Sachsenhausen* (2006), an edited collection of testimonies by survivors of the Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz concentration camps. I thank my colleague Anette Homlong Storeide for this information.
3. Visual history has of course also been used to refer more generally to the use of pictures as sources and as objects of historical research.
4. See: http://www.zeitzeugenboerse.de/zeitzeugen/werden.html.
5. As seen before, secondary witnessing has of course also been given a different meaning. In the context of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, secondary witnessing refers to the ethics of actively listening to those testimonies and passing them on.
6. This part can only be found in the German version of Klüger's autobiography, not in the English translation *Landscapes of Memory: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (2003).

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