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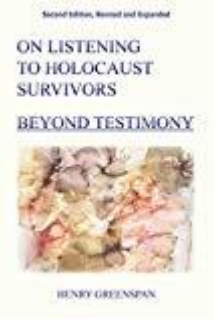
Henry Greenspan. *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony.* Second Edition. St. Paul: Paragon House, 2010. xvi + 316 pp. $19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-55778-877-1.



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Rethinking Holocaust Testimony: A New Approach to Survivor Accounts

One cannot--or should not--study the words of Holocaust survivors without engaging with the work of Henry Greenspan. Greenspan is one of the most important scholars of what is elsewhere called "Holocaust testimony," although after reading Greenspan's book, one can no longer use the term without reflection. *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony* is the second, expanded edition of Greenspan's seminal 1998 work, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History*. The new edition expands and deepens the original work, and the new subtitle reflects the book's more direct confrontation with the dominant paradigms and texts of the field. Yet this book is not a polemic; Greenspan presents a nuanced analysis, without hyperbole, that thoughtfully considers the work of others and that seeks to engage with survivors' ongoing efforts to share their experiences of the Holocaust. This compelling and topical book will be of value not only to Holocaust scholars, but also to those interested in oral history, trauma, memory, and the aftermath of genocides.

Today, over one hundred thousand survivor accounts of the Holocaust have been collected by such organizations as Yad Vashem, the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University, and the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education. Most of these narratives have been recorded since 1980 under the rubric "Holocaust testimony," a term imbued with juridical and religious overtones. Indeed, "testimony" has become so central to Holocaust memory that it seems almost heretical to suggest that we might need to move "beyond testimony," as Greenspan argues. Yet Greenspan, whose commitment to remembering the Holocaust has been shaped by more than thirty years as a psychologist in conversation with Holocaust survivors, challenges this most sacred trope. His astute analysis makes the second edition of *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors* both a welcome expansion of his earlier thinking and a

particularly compelling companion to recent work by Tony Kushner, Annette Wieviorka, and Gary Weissman, research that Greenspan's first edition helped shape.

Greenspan contends that we should move not only "beyond testimony," but beyond much of the vocabulary that shapes contemporary discourse about Holocaust memory. He writes that many of the terms frequently used in the context of survivors, such as references to their "stories" and "legacies," function as a kind of "rhetorical compensation prize." "'Stories' and 'legacies,'" Greenspan writes, "are exactly what survivors of atrocity (almost by definition) do *not* end up with" (p. xiv). The repeated invocation of such imagery, he argues, reflects an increasingly ritualized relationship to Holocaust survivors, "with more and more talk *about* survivors but not necessarily more sustained talk *with* them" (p. 42).

To engage survivors more genuinely, Greenspan has developed a methodology that centers on multiple interviews, collaborative inquiry, and sensitivity to context. In place of "testimonies"--one-way transmissions of fixed and finished accounts--he offers sustained dialogues, over years and even decades, in which the complexity and mutability of survivors' accounts become evident. This approach also highlights survivors' attempts to construct their accounts according to what they judge to be tellable by them and hearable by their listeners, a process frequently more self-conscious than is generally assumed. As Leon, one of Greenspan's interviewees, describes his retelling: "It is *not* a story. It has to be *made* a story. In order to convey it. And with all the frustration that implies. Because at best you compromise. You compromise" (p. 3). The subsequent chapters of Greenspan's text systematically explore how survivors make such stories and how they contend with the inevitable compromises.

Greenspan's approach differs in significant ways from other analyses of Holocaust accounts, such as Dori Laub's psychoanalytical approach, developed with Shoshana Felman in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), and Lawrence Langer's textual analysis, articulated in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (1991). It is Langer's work that Greenspan most directly engages in this second edition. While one can hear Greenspan arguing for a new methodology throughout the text, the conversation with Langer comes to a head in Greenspan's discussion of Abe, a survivor whom Greenspan has known for years.

Abe's account has been discussed in two of Langer's books, as well as in several other well-known texts. In the account in question, Abe articulates a feeling of guilt for the death of his brother. As quoted by Greenspan, Langer reads this as a way for Abe to reclaim moral agency, "'accepting his own blame for his little brother's death rather than to embrace the law of systematic caprice that governed the selection process'" (p. 241). Yet listening to multiple accounts from Abe, as well as Abe's own reflections on his retellings, leads Greenspan to an understanding not accessible to Langer. Greenspan discovers that Abe's account has been shaped by his sense of audience. Abe does not focus on guilt to avoid the reality of the camps; he does so because it is what his audience can hear. Abe notes about his listeners: "They can't understand, they can't relate to, the terror, the smell, the chaos, the dead bodies all around. How can they relate to that? But *this* [his expression of guilt] they can relate to.... Yes, I noticed that. *This* they related to" (p. 244). Greenspan is gracious in his reading of Langer and recognizes the latter's enormous contribution to assembling and analyzing survivor narratives. Nonetheless, he makes a compelling case that Langer misinterprets Abe--not because of a lack of analytical skill, but because of a methodology that fixes a particular moment in a survivor's recounting as if it held the truth.

On Listening to Holocaust Survivors' central argument--that a collaborative, sustained model of

inquiry offers the best means to approach survivors' recounting--has both epistemological and ethical ramifications. As the example of Abe shows, listening to Holocaust survivors through collaborative inquiry produces more accurate knowledge of their experiences. Knowledge is here figured as "knowing *with*," an ongoing project developed in conversation and relationship, which Greenspan articulates as an end as much as a means. The epigraph for Greenspan's preface to this new edition comes from survivor Ruth Klüger's memoir, ***Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*** (2001): "If they did listen, it was in a certain pose, an attitude assumed for this special occasion. It was not as partners in conversation" (p. ix). Engaging survivors as "partners in conversation," and making the reader aware of the constructs that work against such partnerships, lie at the heart of Greenspan's project.

Although it may be too late to do such sustained listening with most Holocaust survivors, Greenspan reminds us that much work remains to be done. Even at this late date, sustained and collaborative inquiry is being pursued in new work involving the youngest Holocaust survivors. Greenspan's approach has also been the underpinning of a large collaborative oral history project in Montreal. There, his model has been followed in interviews with survivors of the Rwandan and Cambodian genocides and political violence elsewhere.

Greenspan's text raises vital issues about our relationship to the Holocaust and the knowledge we think we gain from listening to survivors. It is also deeply compelling in its humanity. As Greenspan writes, "the sufficient reason to listen to survivors is to listen to survivors. No other purpose is required. Just as none would be required to listen to any other people who endured what they endured in the world we share; with whom we share everything *except* those agonies and those memories" (p. 211). Whatever else may come out of listening to survivors, including new insight into Holocaust history and psychological trauma, Greenspan reminds us that the beginning and end is the listening itself.

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