



Charles Papiernik. *Unbroken: From Auschwitz to Buenos Aires*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. xix + 140 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-3294-3.

Reviewed by Chana Kotzin (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Migration (August, 2004)

Surviving “A Circle of Hell”

In contrast to a strongly held popular belief that Holocaust survivors did not tell of their horrific experiences soon after Liberation, tens of thousands of accounts were written between the years 1945 to 1948.[1] One of these testimonies, or at least a significant part of it, is the book under review. Charles Papiernik first published his testimony of surviving Auschwitz in a Jewish socialist youth magazine *Le Reveil de Jeunes* in 1946 while living in Paris. A half century later, an extended version of his memoirs, that includes his life story before and after his deportation, was published in Spanish as *Una Vida (A Life)* in his adopted homeland of Argentina.[2] This year sees the English translation of his memoirs, published as *Unbroken*, in a still further expanded rendition; including his post-war life as a businessman and also as a Holocaust educator in Uruguay and Argentina. In addition to his memoirs, Papiernik has written extensively about the Holocaust in South American and French Jewish publications over many years. He has also co-written a *Shoah Haggadah*, with Diana Wang, to be read during Passover after the reading of the traditional *Haggadah*.

Given the writing and publishing history of this memoir, composed over decades and translated and retranslated into several languages before English, it is not surprising that parts of this work feel, on occasion, choppy and a bit uneven. While it does not have the eloquence or literary skills of some Holocaust memoirists, this matters very little given the author's ultimate aims: to testify, to chronicle his specific experience, to memorialize those who did not survive, and to educate future generations about this terrible period in human history.

Section 1 of the memoir begins in pre-war Poland, in a small village called Przysucha, south of Warsaw. This is not the rose-tinted recollection of a world now gone. These are the memories of a childhood filled with sorrow and deprivation even before the impact of Nazism. For Charles, childhood is very short. Born into a traditional Orthodox home just after WWI, the youngest of seven

brothers and a sister, he left school at the age of nine because rising antisemitism made staying any longer intolerable. In a town where Jews and non-Jews lived apart and did not mix socially and where Jews were often verbally and even physically attacked, Charles, attracted by the Hasidic life, left for Warsaw and entered a yeshiva soon after his mother's death. He was just ten years old. Although the yeshiva provided a respite, shelter and community, it was by no means an easy life. For almost two years Papiernik slept on a bench and subsisted on one meal a day. By the time his father died when he was twelve, he was already supporting himself as a night watchman.

But as the attraction of the religious life waned and his exposure to the Bund (Jewish-Socialist Party) increased, Charles left the yeshiva to work. He joined his older brother Faivel and began a miserable existence as a tailor's apprentice. So poor were the two, they were barely able to rent a bed between them (let alone an apartment), and food was always in limited supply. Under these grinding conditions, it was only a matter of time before Charles became ill. Five older brothers had earlier emigrated to Paris to escape poverty, and one, Wolf, now came to Charles's aid, sending money, while organizing his emigration. Papiernik was able to regain his health and eventually joined Wolf and his other brothers in France in 1936. Now sixteen years old, Charles, for a short time, experienced real happiness. “I had family ... Paris was a paradise for me” (p. 22). He worked to bring over his brother Faivel as well as volunteering for the Bund and a youth section of the French section of the Second International (SFIO).

But happiness was fleeting. Two years later, Papiernik witnessed a worsening political climate in France as the growth of public antisemitism mushroomed. Even so, when war was declared, Charles and his brothers dutifully signed up as volunteers for France. When France fell under German occupation, former foreign war vol-

unteers were ordered to surrender themselves by May 14, 1941. Believing naively or desperately (or both) that France “wanted to protect us,” the brothers, along with thousands of other ex-volunteers, presented themselves at police stations across the occupied zone. In retrospect, it was a mistake, recalls Charles, for the “French gendarmes were worthy disciples of the SS,” beating the brothers horribly and otherwise treating them badly. Soon after, Charles was taken to a holding camp at Beaune-le-Rolande, south of Paris. At age twenty four years, Charles was subsequently deported to Auschwitz, arriving there on June 30 1942. Of the 1,400 men and 34 women who left this French transit camp on June 28, 1942 only 35 would survive until liberation (p. 45).

The second and longest section of the memoir chronicles Papiernik’s grim years in Auschwitz, Birkenau and Sachsenhausen and ends with his liberation by the Americans. Entry to Auschwitz is recalled sparely and shockingly by Charles. As another memoirist, Charlotte Delbo, recalls of arrival at Auschwitz. “They expect the worst—not the unthinkable.”[3] Having spent time in a transit camp, Papiernik was becoming used to harsh treatment and confinement. But Auschwitz was on a completely different and terrifying scale. Time was spent on pointless role calls and excruciating squatting for hours on end. Severe beatings were routine, arbitrary and constant. Starved of food and denied water while being held in barracks (or Blocks) in unbearable heat for the first three days, when food finally came, it arrived without the accompaniment of spoons or plates. In desperation, he and the other inmates “submerge our heads in containers and eat avidly.” Charles is then tattooed with a number—43,422—and sent to work as a morgue handler. Transporting hundreds of cadavers is a gruesome introduction to camp “work.” The faces of the corpses bear terrible expressions and their bodies are badly beaten. After working at this job for several days, a weary indifference sets in: “The spectacle of death no longer moves us. We are no longer men.” This is the “new order” of Auschwitz, Papiernik observes, and the way “life” will be lived (pp. 48-49).

Within a short-time, Charles is separated from his brothers and selected to work in the “Construction School” because of his relative youth. He and three hundred other prisoners work on building projects inside and outside the camp. It is a “better” work detail than some of the other jobs, yet the attrition rate for men of this group remains high. Thirty men die on the first day alone in acts of brutal murder by the block chief Major Marek. “For the slightest sin, he kills.... The SS watch and are entertained” (p. 50). Physical conditions in the Kommando (unit) are

no better than the rest of Auschwitz. The terrible thirst continues and puddles of contaminated water often serve as the only source of water. Surrounded by the bodies of the dead, without adequate clean water, submerged in filth and attacked by fleas and lice, epidemics begin and spread rapidly. Medication is nonexistent. Under these desperate conditions, when maintaining one’s own health is a mammoth task, Charles notes the gradual development of comradeship to aid those whose health is failing. Those who could walk go to strenuous efforts to make the weaker among them appear well enough to work, so that they would not be shot on the spot or dispatched “elsewhere” (pp. 54, 68).

Much of the time, however, Charles and his fellow inmates are simply without defense to exert any form of control over their lives. Block chiefs and other individuals in any sort of position of power, use their standing to punish and torture on a daily basis. Alfred Kun was a block chief that took especial delight in exercising unimaginable cruelty as frequently as possible. Known as the “slaughterer of young men,” on one particular occasion he singled out a newly arrived young Dutchman—still healthy and hopeful—for his murderous pleasure. Charles witnessed his brutal slaying with a pickaxe which was then followed by a speech Kun gave while standing atop of the dying young man. Kun reminded those present—as if they needed any reminder—that this was a fraction of what lay ahead of them. In Auschwitz, as Charles observed, brutal events like these and innumerable others, as well as the system itself, were designed to destroy one’s strength to continue. “Everything is created so that slowly, inexorably, our debilitated bodies can’t tolerate this life; so that, destroyed morally, the will to live leaves us” (p. 57).

The subject of resistance or lack thereof, is returned to again and again by Papiernik in this section of his memoirs. Revolt or escape is impossible in their weakened, emaciated and exhausted states, Papiernik explains. To understand how horrendous the daily conditions are in the camp, the appalling and arbitrary violence to which prisoners are exposed to on a constant basis, the terror under which people live through, can only be partially understood by his descriptions. Perhaps one image of how dreadful subsisting in Auschwitz is, is his reminder throughout these pages of the number of daily suicides at the electric wire fences. Many take refuge in suicide because, in Auschwitz, for the majority, Charles explains, death sooner or later (and why not sooner given the conditions?) is the only “liberator” (pp. 51-53, 55). But even in this “inner circle of Hell” Charles and others resist “silently, stubbornly,” by not losing hope (p. 57).

This is an incredible act of will when everything about the camp acts to mitigate against such a hope. Papiernik notes that for his dying comrades and friends, his survival is their only consolation (pp. 59, 87, 138). He will bear witness to their distress, gain justice for their sufferings, and carry their last words to their relatives. It is a burden and a purpose for Charles, and it is perhaps this role that helps him survive four dreadful years in Auschwitz. To survive this “circle of Hell,” one needed something, however tenuous to hold on to, to stop oneself from heading to the wire.

As the war outside of Auschwitz continues and news of Allied advances reaches the inmates inside the camps, Papiernik recalls the rebirth of hope—hope that the nightmare will end and that freedom will come. When bombardment of the camps begins, although it might mean mortal danger for the prisoners, Charles recalls the happiness of many. This means that the war is turning against Germany and release is imminent. This hope is quashed as the camp is emptied and plans are made for Papiernik’s unit “to relocate” to Birkenau (and the crematoria). His group plans to resist, but as they march into Birkenau ready to revolt, in a quirk of fate they are marched back out and redirected to trains, for reasons that remain unknown. Three days later, however, this brief respite is nullified as the train arrives at Sachsenhausen camp, north of Berlin. The remainder of this section, deals with Papiernik’s survival in this camp “of slow death” (as opposed to Auschwitz, “the camp of brutal, rapid, massive death”), and a brutal and foodless death march that decimates the few surviving camp inmates. Liberation occurs on May 2, 1945 by American troops near Schwerin, east of Hamburg.

The last section of the memoir deals very briefly with Charles’s life after liberation: his return to Paris and search for his family, his move to Uruguay and Argentina and his life as an Holocaust educator. Of the six brothers deported to Auschwitz, only his oldest brother survived (his sister had emigrated to Uruguay in the early 1930s). So it is to Montevideo and his sister that Charles goes to build a new life. Settling there in 1948 with his wife Micheline (daughter of a fellow survivor), Papiernik began the family trade—making and selling clothes, eventually opening a small factory. Here he was one of the founding members of Association of Survivors, serving as the group’s president for a period. His two daughters were also born in Uruguay, and his role of Holocaust educator grew out of having to explain to them why they had no grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins. The memoir continues with their move to Buenos Aires, Argentina during the mid-1970s, after twenty-five years in

Uruguay. Again, Papiernik is active in Holocaust education, contributing his efforts to the Holocaust Memorial Foundation, a museum in Buenos Aires. In this part of the memoir, there is remarkably little commentary about antisemitism in either Uruguay or Argentina and no mention of the fact that many Nazis escaped to South America, building comfortable lives for themselves and their families aided by officialdom. As Ilan Stavans has written elsewhere, this situation contributed to the general stifling of a robust public Jewish culture in Latin America and the development of a discourse about the Holocaust and Latin America foreign policy. This makes Papiernik’s book all the more relevant to discussions of the place of the Holocaust in Latin American life—made more pertinent in the wake of the bombing of the Israeli Embassy and the Asociacin Mutual Israelita Argentina (Jewish Community Center) in Buenos Aires in July 1994. Even so, it remains the case that few books or articles are published about the Holocaust and interest in the subject remains low; indeed in Stavans’s gloomy assessment, the growing corpus of work that there is in this area is of more interest to researchers and readers north of the border.[4]

The proliferation of Holocaust memoirs available in English over the last twenty years has given us an insight into the individual human experience of a dreadful period of history that simply cannot be understood merely through the use of traditional documentary material alone. For us to comprehend, as Geoffrey Hartman has said, “what it was like to exist under conditions in which moral choice was systematically disabled by the persecutors and heroism was rarely possible” we need access to the voices and the testimonies of the witnesses and the survivors.[5] Holocaust memoirs, give us such an entryway. In a moving discussion, Colin Richmond suggests that from these sources we are able to draw broad historical interpretations.[6] Papiernik’s memoirs graphically reflect many of the conclusions Richmond reaches: that, simply stated, inside and out of the camps, Germans (including members of the SS and Wehrmacht) as well as Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Poles and others enjoyed torturing and killing Jews. Camp life was geared towards dehumanization, degradation, cruelty, violence, criminality, murder and death. For perpetrators, ethical behavior and moral restraint were jettisoned in favor of absolute control over life and death—there was no limitation over their behaviors and anything was permissible. Despair, loss, extreme suffering and terror of Jewish victims were juxtaposed alongside experiences of mutual-aid, comradeship and self-sacrifice. Slim glimmers of hope remained for a very, very few.

One is tempted to seek heroic meaning in this and other survivor accounts, and this chronicle will certainly satisfy the reader of the inner resilience of survivors. Papiernik rebuilt his life and went on to raise a family and run a successful business in two countries. But lest the reader be lulled in false sense of closure, Papiernik is driven to tell his story year in year out, and in the early years, according to one of his daughters, at the expense of time with his family. One senses that his drive is haunted by his view that there remains a general lack of understanding about the Holocaust, particularly about Jewish resistance in the camps and elsewhere. His resistance and survival in Auschwitz, his memoir and his life since that period are a rejoinder to that misconception.[7]

Notes

[1]. For example Primo Levi, *Se questo e un uomo*, ([Torino] F. de Silva, 1947); Leon Wells, *Death Brigade*, partially published in 1946. Large scale efforts at recording testimonies were organized by several Jewish groups. The Central Historical Commission (CHC) of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Germany organized a network of branches from 1945 in the American zone. By 1948 this Commission had collected 2,500 written testimonies and 10,000 questionnaires. The Jewish Historical Commission in Poland collected 4,000 testimonials by 1946. The Jewish Agency and The Joint, acting cooperatively, collected 3,500 testimonies. Other projects existed in France, Prague, Bratislava and Austria. For more information about these projects see Henry Greenspan, "The Awakening of Memory: Survivor Testimony in the First Years after the Holocaust, and Today," Monna and Otto Weinman Lecture Series, May 17, 2000 (Washington DC: USHMM, January 2001), pp. 4, 16-18. Annette Wieviorka, "On Testimony," in *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, Geoffrey Hartman, ed.

(Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 24-27. In addition to these projects, David Boder, an American psychologist, recorded approximately one hundred testimonies. To hear Boder's interviews on the internet: <http://voices.iit.edu/>. For a listing of Survivor memoirs, some of which were translated and published in English in America during the immediate postwar period, see a listing compiled by D. G. Myers at: <http://www-english.tamu.edu/pers/fac/myers/memoirs.html>.

[2]. Charles Papiernik, *Una Vida* (Buenos Aires: Acervo Cultural Editores, 1997).

[3]. Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 4.

[4]. Ilan Stavans, "The Impact of the Holocaust in Latin America," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 25, 2001), p. B7. For Argentinean government policy towards Jewish refugees and Nazi Anti-Jewish policies see Daniel Feierstein and Miguel Galante, "Argentina and the Holocaust: The Conceptions and Policies of Argentine Diplomacy, 1933-1945," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 28 (2000). For more on the general history of Jews in Latin America, see: Judith Laikin Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America* revised edition (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1998).

[5]. Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Learning from Survivors: The Yale Testimony Project," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1995), p. 193.

[6]. Colin Richmond, "Eastern Atrocities: Three Holocaust Survivor Memoirs," *Journal of Holocaust Education* 5, no. 1 (Summer 1996), pp. 84-94.

[7]. Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. xi-xii.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Chana Kotzin. Review of Papiernik, Charles, *Unbroken: From Auschwitz to Buenos Aires*. H-Migration, H-Net Reviews. August, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9733>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.