Introduction

In addition to literary-historical and theoretical interests, a third concern motivates my examination of Holocaust literature in this essay — namely, the conviction that the literature of the Holocaust has been banished from critical study for long enough and that the full aesthetic and social implications of this literature require closer scrutiny than they receive at present.¹ — Barbara Foley

Elie Wiesel has commented: “If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance, the Sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.” Yet testimonials remain largely stranded in scholarly neglect. Research into how scholars may use genocide accounts as primary sources, helping to inform their work, reveals few serious contributions. Those that do exist, including Lea Wernick Fridman’s *Words and Witnesses* and Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi’s *By Words Alone*, pertain strictly to how one should approach Holocaust literature. This study attempts to help fill this gap, examining first-hand accounts of the acts of genocide in Rwandan and Cambodia. These two events are particularly effective for comparative historical purposes. Each occurred during a different period, in a different geographic location, and under different circumstances.

This article explores the usefulness of testimonials for the historian. On this point, Martin Broszat represents the most popular stance, that because of faulty memory, integrating testimonials with historical work remains dangerous. Abraham J. Peck also explains why historians show hesitation: “Time has passed, and the historian does not trust a memory in which the past has begun to blur, and which has been enriched, or should we say, diminished, by the numerous images since liberation.”

Other than Broszat’s rival, Saul Friedlander — a Holocaust survivor who urges an approach that considers the victim’s voice — few scholars encourage serious examination of genocide accounts. Few, also, have adequately analyzed how Holocaust accounts may help explain the genocide. Virtually no studies,

---

2 Wiesel quoted in Foley, 334.
however, have been conducted on witness accounts of the genocides in Rwanda and Cambodia. Perhaps one notable exception is Paul Kersten’s recently published article, “‘Voice and give voice’: Dialectics between fiction and history in narratives on the Rwandan Genocide.” In this brief but welcome contribution, the author explains “the relations between fact and fiction in literary and journalistic texts.” Yet he devotes only minimal attention to survivor accounts, instead providing an overview of how various writers — journalists, historians, and playwrights — fit into this equation.

I could locate no study analyzing Cambodian genocide accounts, or their potential benefits for a more complete historical understanding. The reasons for such scholarly neglect, which I do not begin to postulate, deserve a separate investigation. Building off the scholarship on Holocaust testimonials, then, including that of Fridman and Ezrahı, I utilize similar tools of analyses to determine how useful for the scholar are survivor accounts of the genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda.

While difficult to judge an account’s veracity, the historian should not so easily dismiss how such documents help explain an event. Depending on the particular genocide, the writing techniques employed, and when accounts were written, one should demonstrate varying degrees of hesitation. Indeed, testimonials from different genocides contain distinct characteristics. However, a thorough understanding of structure, style, and content helps one navigate potential weaknesses, thereby extracting the most reliable information to produce a more complete history.


5 Ibid., 1.
Since the Holocaust occurred earlier than the other two genocides under review, and on a much grander scale, there is no shortage of testimonials. However, the plethora of accounts provides a challenge in selecting manageable source material for the historian. I examine the works of Primo Levi, best known for his *Survival in Auschwitz*. To include another perspective on the concentration camps, I consider Margareta Glas-Larsson’s *I Want to Speak*. I also analyze Abraham Lewin’s *A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto* and *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*.

It has proved more difficult to select a sample of Cambodian genocide testimonials, since many fewer have been written. Another disadvantage is that most accounts, like Theary C. Seng’s *Daughter of the Killing Fields*, rely on survivors’ mirky childhood memories. To compensate, Seng includes in her testimonial what her family members say that they recall. Chanrithy Him’s *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up under the Khmer Rouge* employs similar techniques. Haing Ngor’s *A Cambodian Odyssey*, however, is the most painstakingly detailed survivor’s account of the Khmer Rouge, and that regime’s brutality.

Locating an adequate sample of Rwandan genocide accounts proved most challenging, since only a handful are in print or available in English. The most revealing is Paul Rusesabagina’s *An Ordinary Man*, about a brave Hutu hotel manager who saved the lives of over 1,000 Tutsis. His story is particularly well-known, as it inspired the Hollywood film “Hotel Rwanda.” Phodidas Ndamyumugabe’s *Rwanda: Beyond Wildest Imagination* also offers important insight, but it is filled with spirituality, detracting from what it reveals about what
actually occurred. This is less true, however, with Immaculée Ilibagiza’s *Left To Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. Though God is an important presence in this testimonial, here it adds to the authenticity of the account.

The focus of the study then shifts, offering a glimpse of how testimony is useful for the survivor. That is, what do victims from the three acts of genocide believe that they gain from recording their own experiences. The last words recorded by Chaim Kaplan before he was deported to Treblinka, where he was sent to his death, were: “If my life ends, what will become of my diary?”

Survivor Primo Levi also writes:

> However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world would not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of your survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will say that they are exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you.\(^6\)

Jews feared not only physical annihilation, Levi writes, but the destruction of their record of existence. If maintaining the historical record seems the primary concern for Holocaust survivors, revenge seems more the concern of Cambodian genocide survivors. In *When Broken Glass Floats*, survivor Chanrithy Him says that writing was her own way of “avenging the Khemer Rouge,” as well as “opposing governments that have inflicted pain and suffering on innocent children, whose

\(^7\) Polonsky, 1.
trust has been exploited time and time again throughout history.” It remains most difficult to provide analysis in regard to Rwandan genocide testimonials, since so few exist.

This study considers a limited number of testimonials, and from only three genocides. Different conclusions might have been drawn had I inspected more sources. This is especially true in regard to Holocaust testimonials, since so many exist, many more than for the genocides in Rwanda and Cambodia. My language skills are also limited, and as such, I have not examined many of these accounts in their original languages. Each survivor also writes about genocide differently. The historian should consider that as a chemist, for example, Levi has superior writing and analytical abilities to non-academics. Hopefully, however, analysis appeals to reason. For too long, historians have ignored genocide testimonials, useful historical documents. While drawbacks to their use certainly exist, they do so to different extents — depending on the document being examined and the particular genocide under investigation. Instead of categorically disregarding these documents, succumbing to indifference, one should take the extreme care required to examine them.

---

Providing the Historiographical Framework

So long as the possibility of another Holocaust remains with us — and the present world situation hardly renders such a speculation idle — we would do well to explore any avenue that can increase our understanding of the phenomenon of fascism. Indeed, if we critically evaluate the efforts at narrative interpretation undertaken by those who have grappled with the experience of Nazism, we may come to understand better the peculiar forms of historical blindness that continue to impede full recognition of the significance of the Holocaust in our own time. The examination of authorial stage and audience response in Holocaust literature is thus integral to a comprehension of the meaning of the Holocaust itself; the historical moment and its artistic mediation are mutually illuminating in a variety of ways.⁹
— Barbara Foley
Holocaust testimonials have long been kept from serious scholarly consideration. Many historians fear that the passing of time blurs memory. James E. Young explains that the survivor’s recollection has played only a minimal role in Holocaust historiography, mostly due to the distinctions most scholars maintain between memory and history — “history as that which happened” and “memory as that which is remembered of what happened.”¹⁰ Saul Friedlander, the Club Chair in Holocaust Studies at the University of California Los Angeles, argues that one must neglect the survivor’s memory of events, whose value becomes lost to the historian.

As Friendlander writes in his introduction to Nazi Germany and the Jews, historical understanding of the Holocaust remains impossible without taking into account the voices of the victims: “For it is their voices that reveal what was known and what could be known. Theirs were the only voices that conveyed both the clarity and insight and the total blindness of human beings confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality.”¹¹ Testimony, while imperfect, remains a part of the past. Historians should want to hear these accounts, so that they can understand how victims understood, or even misunderstood, the events occurring around them. Friedlander states: “If one wants to understand the victim’s words, he must understand it with their own biases — and there you capture its authenticity.”¹²

Young argues that “what is at issue here is not what history can recover from memory, but what memory will bequeath to history.” More specifically, what shall historians do with the memory of genocide survivors? Should their

---

¹² Interview with Friedlander, Jan. 4, 2007.
records always be regarded as tarred, useless for historical purposes? Or is there a place for such testimony, however flawed it may be, for the historian’s larger understanding of events. To address such questions, this historian must first scrutinize how academics have debated the use of testimony in explaining the Holocaust. Subsequent chapters will focus on how these discussions may be applied toward exploring the specific strengths and drawbacks of Rwandan and Cambodian genocide testimonials — of which there has been virtually no scholarly examination.

Friedlander’s UCLA debate on the use of testimony

In April 1990, Friedlander convened a three-day conference at UCLA entitled “Nazism and the Final Solution: Probing the Limits of Representation.” Dozens of scholars gathered from around the world to participate, “most of them not the usual interlocutors in discussions of the Holocaust.” Friedlander required new perspectives regarding the significance and usefulness of the survivor’s experience.

French philosopher Jaques Derrida opened the conference with a two-hour address, focusing on the need to debate the usefulness of testimony. The event continued with lectures by other literary critics and historians, including Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Carlo Ginzburg, and Robert Boyers. Friedlander also invited scholars more familiar with the period, including Geoffrey Hartman, Charles Maier, Peter Novick, Amos Funkenstein, and Eric Santne, among others.\footnote{Young, 19.}

The articles from the conference, published in Probing the Limits of Representation, 

\footnote{Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,” ed., Saul Friedlander (Harvard University Press, 1992) 2.}
present the main issue raised during the three days: “Has this horrible act of
genocide so clouded and influenced those writing on the subject, especially the
survivors and the participants, that a true and accurate representation of the ‘Final
Solution’ is impossible to obtain?”

This question had first been the point of a much heated debate between
White and Ginzburg, who outlined their respective positions in the collection. White contends that personal accounts are more prone to distortion. As such, they
cannot establish true, objective history. Though agreeing about testimony’s relative
instability, Ginzburg rejects the absolute relativism that he believes this premise
promotes — that no single account reveals a universal truth and that all experiences
are contingent on the individual and situation involved. White clarifies that he does
not intend to argue for a history that blurs the distinction between real and imaginary, or one that denies certain past events have occurred. Rather, he believes
“when it comes to apprehending the historical record, there are no grounds to be
found in the historical record for preferring one way of construing its meaning over
another.”

Ginzburg responds that “even the voice of one single witness gives us some
access to the domain of historical reality, allows us to get nearer to some historical
truth,” and overlooks the problem of the passage of time. White, however, views
this as a impenetrable obstacle in being able to apply survivor testimonials to
historiography. In the introduction to Probing the Limits of Representation,
Friedlander explains that he pursues a compromise, an approach in which the

15 Thomas T. Spenser. Review of “Probing the Limits of Representation.” The History Teacher, Vol. 27,
No. 2. (Feb., 1994), 14.
16 Spenser, 2.
17 Spenser, 7.
18 Spenser, 9.
historian and the victims’ voices are heard. “For all of us there is a twilight zone between history and memory,” he quotes from Eric Hobsbawm’s *Age of Empire*, “between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as part of, or background to, one’s own life.”19 Friedlander admits that the historian must distinguish between memory and what actually occurred, and that the “process involved in the molding of memory is, theoretically at least, antithetical to that involved in the writing of history.”20 Nonetheless, he supports what he believes to be a suitable compromise between both perspectives:

The representation of a recent and relevant past has to be imagined as a continuum: the constructs of a public-collective memory find their place at one pole, and the dispassionate historical inquiries at the opposite pole. The closer one moves to the middle ground, that is, to an attempt at general interpretations of the group’s past, the more the two areas — distinct in their extreme forms — become intertwined and interrelated.21

The historian has an obligation to pursue the “middle ground,” Friedlander says, since it provides a more complete reconstruction. While one of the foremost proponents of applying the victim’s voice to historiography, Friedlander contends that Ginzburg does not apply nearly enough scrutiny in this respect. At the same time, however, White ventures too far in the opposite direction: “Going to each extreme is a kind of fantasy, and one can argue until Doomsday against White or Ginzburg, so the middle ground, the integrated approach, is what I try to follow.”22

In his article *Trauma, Transference and ’Working through’ in Writing the History of the Shoah*, Friedlander explains this approach. “Working through,” in

---

19 Ibid., vii.
20 Ibid., vii.
21 Ibid., vii.
22 Interview with Friedlander, Jan. 4, 2007.
this instance, means allowing for a balance between history-telling and presenting testimony: “It entails, for the historian, the imperative of rendering as truthful an account as documents and testimonials will allow, without giving in to the temptation of closure. Closure in this case would represent an obvious avoidance of that which remains intermediate, elusive and opaque.” Dispassionate historical analyses must appear throughout the narrative, including alternative yet plausible interpretations of how events may have transpired. Whether integrated “into the narrative structure of a history or developed as a separate, superimposed text is a matter of choice, but the voice of the commentator must be clearly heard,” he says.

Friedlander’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews* practices integration. The volume focuses on the period between 1933 and 1939, when the Nazis intensified their anti-Semitic stance. Most Germans, Friedlander explains, moderately anti-Semitic, supported Jewish persecution. Even at the height Hitler’s power, “the majority of Germans, although undoubtedly influenced by various forms of traditional anti-Semitism and easily accepting the segregation of the Jews, shied away from the widespread violence against them, urging neither their expulsion from the Reich nor their physical annihilation.” Much of the book considers how the Jews responded to their deteriorating situation.

If wholly original conclusions are absent from this work — and it is more a welcome synthesis of past studies — Friedlander has introduced one novel approach to Holocaust studies. He contends that historiography has mistakenly focused on the “Nazi machinery of persecution and death, paying but scant

---

24 Ibid., 53.
attention to the wider society, to the wider European and world scene or to the changing fate of the victims themselves.”26 Other studies, conversely, “concentrate on the history of the victims, offering only a limited analyses of Nazi policies.”27 This book contributes a unique perspective, though, in that while Nazi policies are considered central in understanding the period, so are victims’ experiences: “It is too often forgotten that Nazi attitudes and policies cannot be fully assessed without knowledge of the lives and indeed the feelings of the Jewish men, women, and children themselves.”28 With the start of each chapter, he examines how victims responded to evolving Nazi policies, helping to place the Nazis’ actions into a wider, more complete perspective.29

In the chapter “The New Ghetto,” which details the segregation of the Jews from German society, Friedlander quotes Leopold Obermayer, transported to Dachau in 1935. In a horrific account, Obermayer describes the unsanitary conditions of his cell, “which gives the feeling of a cellar.”30 Upon discovering that he is gay, the Nazis force him into an even smaller cell. Obermayer remembers how with his arms bound behind his back, he was forced to urinate and defecate in his pants.31 The focus then shifts to Hitler, and how his increased popularity this same year correlated with intensified persecution. The integrated approach contributes a humanistic element to this unfolding history, while also maintaining a scholarly perspective. Indeed, Friedlander acknowledges that victims represent their own self-understanding, and he is “conscious of their linguistic peculiarities, particular

26 Friedlander, Nazi Germany and the Jews, 2.
27 Ibid., 2.
28 Ibid., 2.
29 Ibid., 2.
30 Leopold Obermayer quoted in Friedlander, Nazi Germany and the Jews, 113.
31 Friedlander, Nazi Germany and the Jews, 114.
partialities, and psychological and ideological leanings.”32 The result delivers a more complete account, one in which testimony proves essential for the period’s historical reconstruction.

A Holocaust survivor, Friedlander says he has a duty to integrate the victim’s voice into his history: “I feel obligated to continue with my research, and to allow the survivor’s experience to be presented in historical studies.”33 In his next book, examining the years of extermination, the integrated approach will be utilized even more. “Whereas the first book [incorporates the] victim’s voices at the beginning of each chapter, it will be present throughout this entire volume.”34 In When Memory Comes, Friedlander’s memoir, he details fleeing Czechoslovakia as a young boy. It reads like a harrowing account, as seven-year-old Friedlander parts from his Jewish parents, who would perish at Auschwitz. He survives by posing as a gentile in a Roman Catholic Church in France. The narrative weaves between periods, and “through shifting prism of eyewitness accounts, stories, documents in archives,” Friedlander tries to understand his complicated past and the Holocaust.35 Through this process, he comes to establish “the gaze of a historian,” and realizes the necessity of a “synthesis for a thoroughgoing coherence that no longer excludes anything.”36

Although Nazi Germany and the Jews has been generally well-received, Friedlander says that not enough historians have followed its approach: “As far as recent publications are concerned, the integrated approach I used has not been

---

32 Gulie Ne’eman Arad, “Nazi Germany and the Jews: Reflections on a Beginning, a Middle, and an Open End.” Found in History and Memory, Passing into History: Nazism and the Holocaust beyond Memory. Gulie Ne’eman Arad, ed. (Indiana University Press, 1977) 429.
33 Interview with Friedlander, Dec. 7, 2006
34 Interview with Friedlander, Dec. 7, 2006
35 Saul Friedlander, When Memory Comes. (Noonday Press, 1991) 144.
36 Friedlander, When Memory Comes, 114.
pursued by many other historians, and this is unfortunate.” He attributes this to historians who hesitate to rely on testimony, considered “too tainted” for serious consideration. Despite Friedlander’s irritation, Lawrence Rees’ *Auschwitz: A New History* has developed the method even farther. Whereas Friedlander incorporates the victim’s voice only at the beginning of each chapter, Rees does so throughout his account — which contends that while Auschwitz is a major symbol of the Holocaust, it is also one of the least understood. The history of Auschwitz is complicated because it was not a single camp, but rather a complex of three main and various smaller locations that served different functions. Rees further contends that the Auschwitz complex was not the result of a coherent plan developed by the Nazis. While its establishment initially as a concentration camp and subsequently as a death camp emanated from Hitler and his subordinates, the local Nazis shaped the brutal methods and torture carried out there. Auschwitz is a vehicle for understanding the development of the Final Solution, Rees explains, as well as understanding the mentality of the perpetrators. Dozens of personal interviews with not only survivors, but also former Nazi perpetrators, are nicely integrated into analyses.

In the chapter “Frenzied Killings,” Rees outlines how Hitler ordered the German army into Hungary, “one of the few nations in eastern Europe that had not yet been plundered.” More than 725,000 Jews lived in Hungary, near five percent of the nation’s population. Although they suffered from anti-Semitic legislation, most of the communities there remained intact. March 19 marked the beginning of

---

40 Rees., 200.
a nightmare, however. Transformation from relative safety to absolute despair occurred more swiftly in Hungary than in any other nation during the Nazi epoch, Rees explains.\(^\text{41}\)

Alternating between history-telling and presenting the victim’s voice, the chapter proves especially effective. This is underscored by the author’s integration of Alice Lok Cahahana, a young girl who lived happily with her family in a town near the Austrian border. Her grandfather owned a carpet-weaving factory, but once the Nazis arrived, it, along with her property, went to a German named Krüger for almost nothing. Alice explains her feelings while she passes by her house on a train, which, unbeknownst to her, is bound for Auschwitz: “I was so embarrassed,” she said. “The scene of going out of Egypt came to my mind. And here was Mr. Krüger watching us go by, not with compassion but with glee — the owner of our factory, the owner of our house.”\(^\text{42}\) When the train arrives Alice is separated from her family and sent to Birkenau. After showering and having her head shaved before entering the camp, she is forced to change into clothes much too big for her. Rees then transitions to history-telling, stepping back from including more testimony to explain how Alice was one of over 400,000 Hungarian Jews who experienced such severe dehumanization.\(^\text{43}\) By reverting to this wider historical perspective, a more complete portrayal results, one which associates faces with statistics, and allowing one to better understand the tremendous suffering endured at Auschwitz.

Eighteen years after the UCLA conference, Friedlander wants more scholars to integrate testimony with historiography. In November, he addressed another

\(^\text{41}\) Ibid., 200.
\(^\text{42}\) Ibid., 225.
\(^\text{43}\) Rees, 227.
diverse group of scholars, focusing on how at the micro-level survivor experiences must integrated into historiography: “And, at this micro-level, much of this history is that of individuals.” He cites a postcard that Louise Jacobson’s sent to her father in Paris on 21 February 1943. Writing from the Drancy internment camp, Louise writes that she is in high spirits. “I have eaten very, very well,” she writes, concluding, “my daddy, I kiss you a hundred thousand times with all my strength.” On 13 February 1943 she departs, headed toward Auschwitz. En route, another tells Louise that upon arriving at the camp, she should declare herself a chemist, as to appear useful and avoid an immediate death. When asked about her profession, however, Louise responds “student,” and she goes to the gas chamber. Such accounts may only reinforce what is already known, that, for instance, the Nazis granted temporary pardons to those with useful skills. Yet these accounts are important because they “tear through the smugness of scholarly detachment.” Louise’s experience, as one example, contributes a humanistic element to the period. As source for the history of Jewish life then, “this remains irreplaceable.”

The Martin Broszat and Saul Friedlander debate

Serious debates about the victim’s voice began in the mid-1980s, and the exchange between between Broszat and Friedlander is most significant. In his essay, “A Plea for the Historicization of National Socialism,” Broszat urges historians to resist judging the period as a special era. This plea caught Friedlander’s attention, who contended that Nazi Germany cannot be viewed as a

---

normal period in history. The chief point of contestation, however, is that in defending their respective opinions, the two disagree on the applicability of the victim’s memory. Broszat considers this an obstacle to historicization, diverting scholarly attention away from how history actually progressed by focusing on the Nazi’s Final Solution. Friedlander, however, feels “that the historicizing process and the global trend toward normalization would eliminate the memory of the most extreme aspects of the Nazi Period.” That is, the Holocaust as remembered by the victims.

In 1987, Broszat and Friedlander exchanged a series of letters, outlining their respective stances in further detail. Broszat defends his “Plea,” stating that “the ‘normalization’ of our historical consciousness cannot in the long run exclude the Nazi period, nor can it succeed by bypassing it.” While the historian should respect the formation of the victim’s memory, Broszat continues, it should remain a “mythical memory.” Also alarming is his suggestion that German scholars, since fewer suffered under the Nazi regime, are better suited to produce more objective history:

Among the problems faced by a young generation of German historians more focused on rational understanding is certainly also the fact that they must deal with just such a contrary form of memory among those who were persecuted and harmed by the Nazi regime, and among their descendants — a form of memory which acts to coarsen historical recollection.

Broszat neglects to consider, however, accounts written during the years of persecution and extermination, documents less prone to forgetfulness. Surprisingly,
Friedlander does not raise this matter in any of his exchanges. Broszat also specifies “German historians,” implying that historians who are descendants of perpetrators can better distance themselves from history than those belonging to the victims.\textsuperscript{53} Following Broszat’s logic then, German historians are better suited to provide a more objective history, whereas their Jewish counterparts, overwhelmed by grief and despair, are more likely to distort events by giving credence to the survivors’ experience. Interestingly enough, Broszat never considers the likelihood that German historians, hesitant to examine all of the Holocaust’s horrors, further detailing their country’s violent past, are just as likely to produce flawed historical accounts.

The historical significance of Auschwitz provides another matter of dispute between the two historians. Broszat argues that the location cannot be made into the “decisive measuring rod for the historical perception of this period.”\textsuperscript{54} For a historian to be taken seriously, he must not accept that Auschwitz represents the culminating feature of the period, “the cardinal point, the hinge on which the entire factual complex of historical events of the Nazi period turns.”\textsuperscript{55} This point is well-argued, but Broszat falters, saying that considering the location central in the evolution of the epoch would fail to do justice to the non-German and non-Jewish victims. By giving Auschwitz less attention, though, does this not fail to do justice to the memory of the Jews who perished there? Interestingly enough, Friedlander does not raise this question. Instead, he agrees that while the Nazi era cannot be considered for its catastrophic end only, “one must start at the beginning and follow the manifold paths as they present themselves, including numerous

\textsuperscript{53} Friedlander also reaches this conclusion in his 20 Nov. 1987 letter to Broszat. Found in Baldwin, 110.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 116.
developments within German society which had little to do with Auschwitz, and throughout the history of the era.”\textsuperscript{56} Yet, though the historian knows the end-result of Auschwitz, Friedlander says, “this should not hamper the exploration of all the possible avenues and interpretations.”\textsuperscript{57} Instead, he must select the central elements around which the Holocaust is constructed, always including the victim’s voice as central.

It is unfortunate that this debate revolves mostly around Holocaust testimonials. That is, I could locate no studies considering the historical usefulness of Cambodian and Rwandan genocide accounts. This neglect has existed long enough, and it is time for historians to extend Friedlander’s plea. Only after locating potential defects will historians consider integrating victim’s experiences into historiography. The ensuing chapters are by no means all-encompassing. Many more testimonials need to be examined, and in much greater depth, before any substantial progress can be made toward this end. Rather, it is my hope for ensuing analyses to be used as a starting point for future discussion. If historians acquire the patience and knowledge to properly examine testimonials drawn from different acts of genocide, screening them for potential inaccuracies, the study of history would progress tremendously.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{57} Friedlander’s letter to Broszat, date unknown. Found in Baldwin, 119.
Common Problems Found in Holocaust, Rwandan and Cambodian Testimonials

The Holocaust has been figured as “without witness” because survivors reportedly tell us in the midst of testimony, they cannot find the words, images, and narrative form.58 — Sara R. Horowitz.

Before integrating any testimonial into the historical record, the text must be screened for defects. Peck explains one factor historians must consider with testimonials written after the Holocaust: “Time has passed, and the historian does not trust a memory in which the past has begun to blur, and which has been enriched, or should we say, diminished, by the numerous images since liberation.” A fictional one-act play, Ida Fink’s “The Table,” offers an example of diminished memory. Four Jewish survivors testify at a war crimes trial regarding an “action” that they witnessed and escaped some twenty-five years before. Of the hundreds collected in the market place, the survivors were among the few who escape. Over two decades later, they appear in court to bring to justice those responsible. The play brings to life these accounts, which while agreeing that a massacre in fact occurred, dispute seemingly unimportant details. The interrogation, for instance, focusses on the positioning of a random table in the market place, its size and shape, and how many Nazis sat there. The prosecutor focuses on the table, he explains, simply because he requires “something concrete” to verify their testimony.

The court finds each account dubious because of minute discrepancies between how each recalls the table. If the historian hopes to uncover more about the past, however, he must not so easily dismiss such accounts. Rather, he should accept what remains largely uncontested, that, as “The Table” implies, a massacre occurred. Differences in how one remembers such minute details are of little importance.

61 Ibid., 44.
Just as the victims in “The Table” did not provide exactly the same oral account, neither do written accounts. Indeed, writers becomes “committed to their version of events partly because of the ‘egocentric predicament,’ the ability to see only through one’s own eyes and in the light of one’s own experiences, which is the most prevalent form of subjectivity.”62 Historian Lucy S. Dawidowicz similarly warns that one must factor in the writer’s personal involvement, which includes varying degrees of prejudice. This problem becomes compounded by the fact that no matter how real events were, once narrated, they enter a discourse that may overlap with fiction.63 Genocide testimonials contain some of the same attributes as fiction books, “forms and structures endemic to all narrative.”64 Friedlander appears aware of this, and posits that “if a testimony sounds too polished and organized, this often indicates that either the author or somebody else had tampered with it.”65

Cambodian genocide survivor Theary C. Seng’s Daughter of the Killing Fields echoes Friedlander’s concern. She evacuated Phnom Penh with tens of thousands, yet somehow, amidst the chaos, recalls the exact route that she and her family took out of the capital:

My family drifted with the ebb and flow, joining the stream of people leaving the city. From our house, we turned right onto Trasak Paem Street, away from the central market, where a group of Khmer Rouge soldiers was setting up a security checkpoint for enemies, khmang. Upon reaching Sihanouk Boulevard, we weaved left among the heavy traffic of human bodies. Independence Monument, with its naga motif, was in front of us. Upon reaching this landmark, we turned right, onto Norodom Boulevard, which took us south to the ‘head of road’, Kbal Khnial.66

63 Ibid., 10.
64 Young, 25.
65 Interview with Friedlander, Jan. 7, 2007
One might question the authenticity of this passage, especially since Seng has admitted that her recollection is sometimes incomplete: “I found that many times, rather than sequential and profound recalling of situations, stray images floated in and out of my head, giving me a glimpse here and there of my past.” Additionally, she mentions that it proved difficult to distinguish between her recollection and that from others she had heard. While she says her experience was worthy of being placed into book form, she realizes that it is a “medium that inevitably creates an aura of heroism around the author.” In her preface Seng expresses the likelihood of her account’s subjectivity:

By its nature, this story is filtered through a biased and flawed perception: mine. I cannot escape being human. This is not to say I have not made a very conscientious effort to be fair, objective and generous in my assessment. I have. Nonetheless, it is only one perspective — my perspective — one tainted by human depravity and an instinctive want for self-protection. Moreover, I wield the power of the pen and the medium does not allow for immediate rebuttal and clarification from those involved in my story which might provide a more balanced, full view.

Seng, however, insists that her story is worth telling. For despite its imperfections, it maintains the historical record. Furthermore, she believes that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it, and that her own account will provide, for members of the generation, “a bridge to their roots and a way to understand their family’s sacrifices for them.”

Testimony also suffers from what Friedlander calls “deep memory,” that which the author is unable to represent. More specifically, “common memory is
that which tends to report or establish coherence, closure and possibly a redemptive stance,” and deep memory is “that which remains essentially inarticulable and unrepresentable, that which continues to exist as unresolved trauma just beyond the reach of meaning.” No matter how detailed an account may appear, it remains imperfect, incomplete, as one Holocaust survivor mentions:

How can anyone understand the aching that is Auschwitz? The compulsion to fill the void that is Auschwitz? The search, the reaching out. The futility. The irrevocable statement that is Auschwitz. Who can understand the inconceivable futility that is Auschwitz. The loss of perspective. The loss. The total irreconcilable loss. I belong to this void. Nothing can change that. Nothing. My search for a home, for human relationships, for knowledge. This is one unalterable allegiance. This is where I belong. To Auschwitz.

In describing deep memory, Friedlander analyses a frame of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* — in which the dying father addresses his son, Artie, with the name of Richieu, Artie’s brother who died during the Holocaust. The trauma of his first son’s death remains unrepresentable, deep, and the historian must question: What will become of this deep memory, that which the survivor cannot completely describe, after he dies? Will such experiences forever remain dormant, thereby unfit for inclusion into the historical record? These are important considerations. Many survivors cannot find the appropriate words to accurately convey their entire experience.

Primo Levi, the Italian chemist who survived Auschwitz, explains: “Our language lacks the words to express the offense, the demolition of a man.”

---

71 Friedlander, “Trauma, Transference, and Working through in Writing the History of the Shoah,” 41.
Charlotte Delbo, sent to Auschwitz for her role in the French resistance, also cannot explain the whole reason for her survival. She faces a similar problem in that “the words do not have the same meaning” as what she feels. This hardship exists with testimonials from other acts of genocide. Most historians, Seng would likely argue, are unable to fully appreciate her account. Not having experienced the genocide firsthand, it remains difficult to find its full potential. The survivor’s experience remains of secondary importance, acknowledged but not sufficiently considered by historians.

74 Charolette Delbo quoted in Dawidowicz, 14.
Problems found in Holocaust, Rwandan, and Cambodian Testimonials

Have you read, re-read, attentively read, the survivors’ testimonies? They seem to have been written by one man, always the same, repeating a thousand times what you, the reader, even if you are his contemporary, will never understand. — Elie Wiesel.

Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument. This is a threadbare truth known not only to psychologists but also to anyone who has paid attention to the behavior of those who surround him, or even to his own behavior. The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous information. — Primo Levi

Many historians seem too willing to avoid integrating testimonials with historiography, and such hesitation has logic. Depending on the specific genocide, however, this chapter posits that shortcomings may appear more or less extreme. Facts that the historian should consider include: 1) the specific nature of the genocide and how the killings were carried out, 2) how many survivors have recorded their experiences for purposes of cross-examination, 3) what types of people (age, education, profession) have recorded their experiences, and 4) how much time has passed since the genocide and one’s attempt at writing a testimonial.

**Potential problems found in Holocaust testimonials**

In regard to the Holocaust, accounts are often burdened by existential guilt, remorse for having survived when loved ones perished. Consequently, “the accounts tend either to magnify the incidents which the author believes accounted for his survival, or to omit them altogether, thus leaving his survival unexplained.”

Some diarists, Dawidowicz says, became so overwhelmed by food that they wrote about practically nothing but hunger. The diary of Justina Dawidsohn-Draenger, who took part in the resistance movement in Cracow, though, suffers from another impediment. Her testimony appears “burdened by a vocabulary and style of such exaltation and romanticism that it yields little in hard fact (although it succeeds in transmitting a poignant portrait of the moods and attitudes of the Zionist Youth movement).” Still, such accounts are of value since they indicate the way in which the victims perceived themselves, rather than as documents for the establishment of truth.

---

77 Dawidowicz, A Holocaust Reader, 11.
78 Ibid., 11
79 Dawidowicz, 12.
Before concluding that one has understood what the author means to convey, one must carefully examine language. This seems especially pertinent to Holocaust diaries, written during the genocide. Indeed, Jews wrote under conditions of not only extreme persecution, but severe censorship: “Even private papers, whose authors never intended them be read, show obvious signs of coercion and restraint. One way or another, in tone, style, and vocabulary, nearly every writer to to adapt himself to writing under persecution.” As German terror increased throughout Europe, furthermore, the possibilities of free expression dissipated. The Nazis allowed Jews to publish German decrees and orders — but little more. Daidowicz explains: “At every level of leadership Jews feared that whatever they wrote would be regarded as punishable.” Even letters were coded “to protect the sender, the deliverer, the recipient, and the information itself.”

Only first names identified people or places, and diarists seldom referred explicitly to the Nazis, using indefinite designations, such as “they” and “those.” Deviation from these guidelines often resulted in imprisonment, torture, and also execution.

One paramount concern seems that the historian assessing diaries will more readily dismiss their significance, accepting that they have been compromised by endless degrees of censorship. Yet the care in coding such documents also offers historical significance, demonstrating the willingness of the Jews to risk their own well-being to record their experiences.

Adam Czerniaków served as chairman of the Warsaw Judenrat. Tasked with carrying out the Nazis’ orders, he kept a diary in Polish which demonstrated significant restraint. Dawidowicz asserts that even a Gestapo agent “would hardly
have found it objectionable.” In one entry, for example, he records how he begged a Nazi commander, whom he refers only to as A., to release several Jews wrongly accused of stealing: “I imagine that they will be executed tonight, or toward morning... I raised the matter of the probable execution with Brandt [a higher-ranking official] as well. He made no promise to help.” Despite the laconic prose, Czerniaków diary is rich in historical evidence. In painstaking detail it records his efforts, and ultimate failures, to save more Jews from execution. In his last entry, dated 23 July 1942, one day before he committed suicide by swallowing cyanide capsules, he comments on recent orders. He is expected to provide a daily quota of Jews for deportation. “It is 3 p.m.,” he explains. “At the moment there are 4,000 ready to go. By 4 there must be — as per orders — 9,000.” Whereas Czerniaków had once tried intervention to save lives, his last entry accepts the inevitability of destruction.

Yet in a final attempt at salvation, he leaves a suicide note to his wife: “I can no longer bear all this. My act will prove to everyone what is the right thing to do.” The diary reveals an increasing pessimism representative of the larger Jewish experience during the Holocaust. Upon carefully examination, rather than ignoring its usefulness, the historian can obtain a better understanding of this collective struggle.

The vast supply of survivor diaries, letters, and testimonials, Dawidowicz explains, “simplifies and complicates the task of the historian of the Holocaust.” She adds that such documents alone are no substitutes for history, though history

---

84 Ibid., 19.
85 Czerniaków’s entry in Dawidowicz, 254.
86 Czerniaków’s entry in Dawidowicz, 258.
87 Czerniaków’s suicide note in Dawidowicz, 266.
88 Dawidowicz, 20.
cannot be written without them: No documents, of any era, in any culture, in any language, whatever their quantity, comprise the total and true evidence of the historical past. Still, thousands of documents came into being, dictated, recorded, or written in Yiddish, Polish, German — all European languages. Jewish historical committees sprang up in many displaced persons’ camps to gather and preserve these accounts. Most of these collections are in Yad Vashem, and each document must be subject to cross-analyses to establish authenticity. This remains a monumental task for the historian, but the accounts themselves, “fascinating, dreary, horrifying, suggest to the careful reader the sorts of questions that should be asked of them, and point the direction in which answers may begin to be found.”

In exploring the drawbacks of Holocaust accounts, one should note that only a few major studies explore the topic. Friedlander explains: “Some writers are not often given, or escape the luxury of, a careful examination of their literary devices.” Roberta S. Kramer posits that this seems especially true when the writer is a Holocaust survivor: “It is as though the ‘sacredness’ of the subject matter imposes a respectful silence when in comes to critical analyses, as though the Holocaust content defies or takes priority over a serious examination of the writer’s mean of expression.”

Sidra Ezrahi’s book By Words Alone belongs to this limited historiography. It explores how the victim’s memory has reconstructed survivor’s experiences in written form:

---

89 Dawidowicz, 20.
89 Ibid., 20
91 Dawidowicz, 21.
91 Ibid., ix.

31
Even the most vivid presentation of concrete detail and specificity, the most palpable reconstruction of Holocaust reality, is blunted by the fact that there is no analogue in human experience. The imagination loses credibility and resources where reality exceeds even the darkest fantasies of the human mind; even realism flounders before such reality. \(^{94}\)

Yet depending on the writer, how he survived, and the quality of his portrayal, this appears less problematic. The volume is not without its drawbacks, however. In the first section, Ezrachi examines how two different groups of survivors record their experience. The first, the author posits, do not concentrate on the struggle for food. Their testimonials represent an attempt to “put the pages of the book back together.” \(^{95}\) Yet where does Levi’s work belong? Surely, he is as concerned with the historical record as he is with also documenting the starvation that he and others endured:

Here scores of prisoners drove desperate by hunger prowl around, with lips half-open and eyes gleaming, lured by a deceptive instinct to where the merchandise shown makes the gnawing of their stomachs more acute and their salvation more assiduous. In the best cases they possess a miserable half-ration of bread which, with painful effort, they have saved since the morning, in the senseless hope of a change to make an advantageous bargain with some ingenuous person, unaware of the prices of the moment. \(^{96}\)

Ezrachi also fails to explain the second group in sufficient detail. One gathers that she means those who consider the Shoah “the primary and the only given, an event whose essential reality is evil, or ruin, or death.” \(^{97}\) Such people, whom Ezrachi refers to as “mythmakers,” are more susceptible to exaggerating their experience. If

---

\(^{95}\) Ezrachi, 110.
\(^{97}\) Ezrachi, 175.
this is in fact her point, it seems logical enough. She mentions Jerzy Kosinski’s semi-autobiographical *The Painted Bird* — about a boy, identified as either a Gypsy or a Jew, who manages to evade the Nazis — as an example of a mythmaker. The main character, Kosinski, considers the Germans so evil, the Holocaust so unimaginable, that it will forever remain impossible to “integrate the ordeal into a preexistent world view which could provide a link between past and the future.”

Ezrahi also explains that the survivor who fails to associate his suffering with “the collective ordeal” has likely included at least some fictional aspects into his account. She reaches this conclusion after exploring a plethora of accounts, and how most relate as much to their own suffering as that of others. This is observed in Levi’s work. In *Survival in Auschwitz*, he writes: “They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emancipated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace is to be seen.”

Deviation from this norm should cause skepticism about the account’s veracity. Ezrahi, however, admits to exceptions. She says that authentic responses to personal crisis exist, and that any technique must not be used as a blanket-guideline for locating uncertainties. The also applies to Cambodian and Rwandan genocide testimonials.

Whereas Ezrahi supports approaches toward determining the veracity of Holocaust testimonials, Lea Wernick Fridman’s *Words and Witnesses* appears
significantly less interested. Much literary criticism of Holocaust writing, the former claims, “turns into writing about history and about horror in history.”

Instead, the historian should try to “illuminate the illumination, to comment on art and not on life.” Unlike Ezrahi’s fact-verifying approach, Fridman posits that the most useful examination of Holocaust accounts follow a common guideline. That is, “they focus a trained sensibility and the skills of disciplined comment on a work of art.”

Fridman posits that historians should not judge the veracity of a survivor’s memories. Doing so is a pointless endeavor, since no matter how reliable a technique to locate fiction, it remains an imperfect tool. Instead, more historians should explore the “critical and analytic vocabulary,” gaining a better understanding of what the survivor, whether or not he includes fabricated descriptions, wants to convey:

If storytelling claims to tell a story that bears resemblance to a reality, witnessing makes no such claim on behalf of knowledge. It does claim a representational truth. It claims a truth of having seen or been present in an historical and existential, rather than in a simulated, linguistic reality. Witnessing becomes important where events have outstripped imagination and the laws of credibility so that representation itself becomes impossible. As a literary device, witnessing is a means of implicating ‘the hole in the fabric of language.”

Fridman and Ezrahi would have an interesting exchange. The former raises important considerations, including ways to better determine authenticity. The latter believes that any technique to determine authenticity and veracity is

---

102 Ibid., 3.
103 Fridman, 4.
104 Fridman, 134.
unnecessary. Testimonials should be scrutinized more as works of art, not historical documents.

Potential problems found in Rwandan testimonials

The historian must consider different factors when examining Rwandan testimonials, including that all published accounts have been written after the genocide. These ramifications have been explained, including the likelihood that the progression of time has distorted the author’s memory. The genocide occurred in April 1994, yet the testimonials that exist have only been written in the last decade. Paul Rusesabagina, the courageous hotel manager whose experience is portrayed in the film “Hotel Rwanda,” mentions that he wrote his account in 2003, almost a decade after the genocide. Immaculée Ilibagiza completed her testimony that same year, and Phodidas Ndamyumugabe wrote his story in 2000. The historian should not shy away for employing the integrated approach, which Friedlander supports in reconstructing the history of the Holocaust. Still, one must consider that because Rwandan genocide survivors are only now recording their experiences, the historian must scrutinize even more sharply their historical veracity.

Yolande Mukagasana, another survivor, wrote two separate accounts of her experience, the first published two years after the genocide. Yet neither La Mort ne veut pas de moi (Death does not want Anything to do with me) nor N’aie pas peur de savior (Do not be afraid to know) has been translated into English, or any other language, limiting their potential usefulness to those who know French.105 This is especially unfortunate because Mukagasana, who explains how she went to great

105 Trans. by Prof. Jorge Arteta in ROCL.
lengths to hide her children, provides not only one of the earliest survivor accounts of this genocide, but in two separate volumes, also the most extensive.\textsuperscript{106}

For historical purposes, it is unfortunate that the Tutsis did not record their experiences when the Hutus gained control. The underground Warsaw archive, called \textit{Oneg Shabbes}, included leading communal activists who chronicled every aspect of ghetto life under occupation. Emanuel Ringelblum, the Polish historian who created the archive, stated in his diary: “Everyone wrote — journalists, authors, teachers, social activists, young people, even children.”\textsuperscript{107} The final words that another member, Chaim Kaplan, recorded before being sent to his ultimate demise in Treblinka, were: “If I die— what will become of my diary?”\textsuperscript{108} Menhem Cohn also writes regarding the connection that many Jews felt toward their diaries:

\begin{quote}
I considered it a sacred duty for everyone, scholarly or not, to write down everything that he has seen or heard from those who witnessed the murderous actions committed by the barbarians in every Jewish settlement, so that, when the time comes - as it surely will - the world will read and learn what they have done. This will be the richest material for the lamentor who will write the elegy of our times; it will be the most potent inspiration for those who will avenge our sufferings.\textsuperscript{109}
\end{quote}

The \textit{Oneg Shabbes} began in 1939 and ended three years later, when before the ghetto uprising, Ringelblum, along with his family, fled to safety. The Germans executed them in 1944, found hiding with a non-Jewish Polish family. Still, many of the diaries Ringelblum collected survived the Holocaust, placed in milk churns

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{108} Chime Kaplan, as quoted in the Polonsky’s Forward to \textit{A Cup of Tears}, v.
\bibitem{109} Menahem Kon, as quoted in the Polonsky’s Forward to \textit{A Cup of Tears}, vi.
\end{thebibliography}
and tin chests. The first discovery was made after the war in 1946, and more documents were found four years later. Most have since been recovered, providing an invaluable source of information on ghetto life during the Third Reich, but some remain buried.\textsuperscript{110}

However horrific the years of persecution in Warsaw, before 1944, “the Nazis had not yet decided on their ‘final solution’ of the ‘Jewish problem’ by mass murder.” Even with the largest population of Jews under Nazi rule — 450,000 by March 1941 — the ghetto maintained a modicum of stability: “The *Judenrat* was charged with distributing food, housing and work, as well as organizing public services and imposing taxes to allow for these services”\textsuperscript{112} This security enabled the *Oneg Shabbes* directorate “to meet weekly and exchange news and information.”\textsuperscript{113}

In Rwanda, however, no time existed between persecution and extermination. Certain death awaited those who came out of hiding to convene. Furthermore, unlike when the Nazi party won control, extermination began immediately when the Hutus took power. Not only does the lack of survivor accounts leave a significant hole in the historical record, but the historian assessing Rwandan testimonials, written years afterward, must exert more skepticism toward their veracity.

Another problem with assessing Rwandan genocide testimonials — and this is a significant problem — is that so few currently exist. To determine accuracy, the historian must cross-reference descriptions with not only the known historical record, but with other testimonials as well. This has proved most possible to accomplish in regard to the Holocaust, where numerous people have chronicled

\begin{footnotes}
\item Polonsky, *A Cup of Tears*, 13 .
\item Ibid., 13.
\item Polonsky, *A Cup of Tears*, 14.
\item Polonsky, *A Cup of Tears*, 13.
\end{footnotes}
their experiences in the same locations. Yet each Rwandan account describes survival in different locations, under various circumstances, and only one account exists for each case.

For 91 days, Ilibagiza and seven other women huddled in the bathroom of a local pastor’s home, petrified while machete-wielding killers hunted for them. As the only testimonial about this experience, however, should the historian consider *Left to Tell* the definitive account of how each woman survived? Or should Ilibagiza’s words be considered unreliable, at least until the other survivors record their experiences? Another limitation presents itself with Rusesabagina’s short but informative testimonial, *Ordinary Man*. Though he communicated with Hutu commanders to save over 1,000 lives (which alone makes his account worthy of inspection) no other testimonials have been published from those who stayed inside the Mille Collines. This makes it more difficult to judge Rusesabagina’s veracity.

*An Ordinary Man* suffers from another disadvantage not found in most Holocaust testimonials. Rusesabagina records his account with the help of another writer, *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Tom Zoellner. Did Rusesabagina merely tell his story to Zoellner, as Malcolm X did to Alex Haley? If so, the historian must question if Zoellner excluded any details that Rusesabagina would have otherwise emphasized, or for that matter omitted, had he written his account alone. Or did Zoellner persuade Rusesabagina to write a testimonial that, to make his account more enthralling, included fiction? Neither Zoellner nor Rusesabagina address this in their exchange, that is, how the account came to fruition. As such, the historian must apply more skepticism to an otherwise enlightening testimonial.
Duel-authorship also puts into question the credibility and authenticity of Ndamyumugabe’s account, *Rwanda: Beyond Wildest Imagination*. The survivor explains:

Writing a book is rarely a solitary experience. Cognizant of that fact, I wish to extend my thanks to the individuals that assisted me in the writing of this book. Many thanks go to Pastor Daniel Opuko-Boateng, Mrs. Anne Bissell, and Mrs. Lynette Zvandasara for editing and proofreading the manuscript.\textsuperscript{114}

Ndamyumugabe, however, does not understand the difference between somebody editing a book and somebody co-writing a testimonial. In the first instance, the editor has specific knowledge to locate flaws and inconsistencies, but the work remains the historian’s own. When another helps a survivor write a testimonial though, the authenticity of that account must come into question. How much of *Beyond Wildest Imagination* represents Ndamyumugabe’s unique experience, as he remembers it, and how much represents the participation of others in the writing process?

This problem affects other Rwandan accounts. In the introduction to *La mort ne veut pas de moi*, Mukagasana writes: “I do not live by the written. I live by the word. But I have become acquainted with a writer. He will tell my story.”\textsuperscript{115} She adds that she also required some specific “literary knowledge” to tell her story.\textsuperscript{116} Yet perhaps Mukagasana thought that the writer had distorted the account. Her next one, *N’aie pas peur de savior*, is written alone.\textsuperscript{117} In the foreward to *Left to Tell*, Wayne Dyer, a social activist who says he convinced Ilibagiza to record her

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 9.
experience, says that she “needed help in getting the essence of her story converted to a more readable format.” The book is co-written with Steve Erwin, a journalist.

Of course, something should be said for that fact those who wish to record their experiences may not have the ability to do so. That is, because of a lack of education either they do not know how to write, or they cannot construct a narrative. In this instance, it is quite admirable for survivors to seek out assistance. Yet, perhaps survivors should learn how to write before beginning their testimonials. This way, survivors would be less prone to outside influence that may distort what they are trying to convey. Also, knowing that authenticity has been preserved, historians would likely be more willing to integrate these voices into their works.

Another potential defect is present in Rwandan genocide accounts. One dare not argue with those who claim that faith, especially amidst such violence, played a role in one’s survival. Nonetheless, some writers appear more concerned with praising God, persuading others to do the same, or glorifying themselves than explaining the circumstances around their survival. The historian must then question if these survivors have, even in some small way, created a false representation of themselves. In Beyond Wildest Imagination, for instance, Ndamyumugabe explains how a Hutu friend asks him to destroy his Tutsi identification card. They argue and Ndamyumugabe wonders: “How would I help him appreciate my conviction?” The ensuing pages seem disingenuous, filled with boastfulness and conceit, doing little more than furthering the author’s career as a minister.

---

119 Ndamyumugabe, 44.
“Do you still have the card?” he inquired with unmistakable anger simmering on his face.

“You know where I stand already,” I explained. “I don’t want to depend on myself. I would rather have God defend me the way He has been doing so far, than to take matters into my own hands under such dangerous circumstances.”

I argued that tearing my card would signal my lack of trust in God’s ability to fully protect me. I did not want to be presumptuous. Neither did I wish to lie by denying my Tutsi identity. I was confident that God would not let me down. I was convinced that my basis for action was one of faith rather than presumption.120

Ndamyumugabe associates himself with Moses, leading his people out of Rwanda to safety. His faith is unwavering during the most trying of circumstances, and he never doubts the likelihood of his ultimate survival. What comes off as most insidious is how Ndamyumugabe presents himself as a sage. After professing his unflinching convictions, everybody is convinced of his decision not to destroy his identification card.

“If you have faith in God’s presence and protection, then let us proceed,” said Pierre after understanding my position.

After my speech, everybody, particularly Pierre, became convinced that we could go on without destroying my Tutsi ID card. We took up our belongings and continued on our journey.121

The historian should show skepticism, questioning Ndamyumugabe intentions in writing his testimonial. Was his aim to present a wholly accurate portrayal of his survival experience, intended to fill in historical gaps? Or, on the other hand, was his aim more to present himself as a prophet who, even as mass atrocity occurred around him, never questioned the will of God? The latter seems much more likely.

120 Ndamyumugabe, 53.
121 Ibid., 53.
Ilibagiza’s account also emphasizes how God assisted in her survival, but it exudes more credibility. Whereas Ndamyumugabe presents himself as an all-knowing savior who never doubts the inevitability of his survival, Ilibagiza questions the power of God and his willingness to intervene. Also, Ilibagiza appears extremely aware of the severity of her situation, as well as the fragility of her own mortality. As the fighting starts, Ilibagiza thinks to herself: “I’m lying here trying to picture what I’ll be doing next year, but I can’t. I don’t think I’ll be alive. I have no future.”

Ilibagiza grew up in the western province of Kibuya, in the village of Mataba. When the killings begin, 2,000 men, women, and children come to her father, Leonard, for guidance. As one of the most respected men in the area, Leonard assembles a small fighting force — armed only with stones and machetes — to fend off some nearby Tutsi soldiers. Though Leonard claims a minor victory, he fears that Hutu reinforcements will be more successful. As a protective measure, he orders his daughter, who he fears may be raped and killed if she remains at home, into hiding with Pastor Murinzi, a Hutu. Before the next attack, he delivers a powerful speech: “We will ask God for help, but we will also defend ourselves.”

This thinking diverges from Ndamyumugabe’s, who places his survival entirely in God’s hands. In Ilibagiza’s account, though, the author does not try to concoct a holy figure, one who leaves everything to divine intervention. Rather, Ilibagiza presents her father as a realistic hero, who while believing in the power of faith to help him through this dreadful ordeal, also knows that his own actions decide his fate.

122 Ilibagiza, 47.
123 Ilibagiza, 51.
Unlike Ndamyumugabe, Ilibagiza avoids self-glorification by highlighting her powerlessness. Forced to live in a bathroom “about four feet long and three feet wide,” Ilibagiza wonders how she and five other girls are to survive.\footnote{Ilibagiza, 73.} She explains how “exhausted, hungry, cramped, and hot,” her first days were a “painful haze.”\footnote{Ilibagiza, 73.} They are also unable to use the toilet, lest the Hutus hear the flush. When Hutu soldiers do in fact search the house, Ilibagiza prays for God to protect her. She can hear about 40 men overhead, in the pastor’s bedroom, chanting racial, anti-Tutsi slurs: “Kill the Tutsis big and small... kill them once and kill them all.”\footnote{Ilibagiza, 92.} Ilibagiza begins to worry for her life and wonders if she will see her family again. Despite her prayers, a voice inside her head haunts her: “It’s no use... don’t call on God. Who do you think sent the killers for you? He did! Nothing can save you.”\footnote{Ibid., 92.} This uncertainty is not present in Ndamyumugabe’s account, and suggests that for whatever the defects of \textit{Left to Tell}, its author has attempted to compile an honest account.

Since so few accounts have been written, and since the ones that do exist suffer from a multitude of defects — specifically, glorification, literary and authorial assistance — historians should be most wary of integrating these narratives with Rwandan genocide historiography. Yet this does not mean that we should refrain from examining their potential usefulness. In fact, much important information can be gained from giving such documents a careful read. The relative weakness of Rwandan genocide accounts, also, should not deter the scholar from examining accounts from other, similiar atrocities, each containing distinct characteristics.

\footnote{Ilibagiza, 73.}
\footnote{Ilibagiza, 73.}
\footnote{Ilibagiza, 92.}
\footnote{Ibid., 92.}
Potential problems found in Cambodian testimonials

Cambodian genocide testimonials also suffer from distinct defects, of which the historian should be aware. The Khmer Rouge ordered the capital’s evacuation immediately after Pol Pot became the nation’s official ruler. This sudden act offers one explanation for why no diaries exist. Indeed, it would have been difficult to write about the evacuation as it occurred — with hundreds of thousands fighting thirst, hunger, and murderous Khmer Rouge soldiers. As Mardi Seng, Theary’s brother who also survived the slaughter, explains, “literacy was not very high as I remember, especially with so many from the countryside, and when we were relocated to remote areas, often waiting for something horrible to happen, even if we had paper and pen, many wouldn’t know how to write.”128 Mardi also says that the fear of being caught by the Khmer Rouge dissuaded academics and wealthy citizens, fortunate enough to survive, from recording their experiences during the killings. “At that moment in time, there were just many different things on people’s minds, not the least of which was survival,” Mardi said. “Writing down what we had experienced, that didn’t seem as important until after the fact, until after the genocide was over with and the dust had cleared. Then, it became my duty to remember.”129

Also unfortunate, no diaries have been discovered mentioning Pol Pot’s rise to power. In When Broken Glass Floats, survivor Chanrithy Him explains that “as the Khmer Rouge begin to seize outlying provinces, thousands upon thousands of families flee their homes seeking refuge in Phnom Penh.”130 Him adds that within a

128 Interview with Mardi Seng, Nov. 8, 2006.
129 Ibid., Mardi Seng.
few months, the capital’s population grew from about 600,000 to two million.\textsuperscript{131} Such comments provide important insight about the climate before the genocide. Hem admits, however, that she did not begin writing her testimonial until the late 1980s, more than a decade after the Cambodian genocide. Just as with Rwandan testimonials, then, the historian must contend with documents written years afterward. Although Hem provides accurate figures, one must question how her memory has been eroded by time — and how much she remembers from childhood.

Herein lies another problem in assessing the value of Cambodian genocide testimonials. Many of the authors had survived the ordeal as children. This includes Theary Seng, who explains that while her experience remains unforgettable, recalling exact details remains difficult. To compensate for this shortcoming, Seng explains how she interviewed relatives to help validate her account. Still, she worries since “a lot of the events beyond the personal memories of living relatives may well fall into the category of hearsay.”\textsuperscript{132} Despite her attempt to avoid inaccuracies, Seng explains how her account likely contains untrue details:

In a draft of a previous autobiographical essay, I had written that ‘[We] not only had to endure traveling a long distance and on rugged terrain with an aunt who was in her third trimester of her pregnancy but dangers of banditry, Khmer Rouge soldiers and mines as well.’ In reality, it was not the case that my cousin Visal was in her mother’s womb; she had been born one year earlier. This essay had been intended for publication, and all my family who read it failed to raise the huge factual error with me. It could be that no one noticed the misstatement. But more likely, my relatives were focusing on the spirit of the account and that spirit was correct; we were traveling through dangerous terrain; and it mattered little to them that I had written about the pregnancy instead of factually correct ‘many little children and a one-year-old baby’ that I would write later.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{132} Theary C. Seng, xiv.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., xiv.
Seng admits to the fallibility of memory, and this candor is quite welcome. Yet it proves difficult to distinguish her recollection from passages that represent a conglomeration of memories, describing no one person’s experience. For example, Seng tells how she and her family were transported to the prison camp Bung Rei. She recounts that her mother, worried about the increasingly volatile Khmer Rouge, made a deal with one of the commanders; she sacrificed her body to spare her family. Only seven years old at the time, how could Seng recall such amazing details: “New graves heaved up in a mound and oozed blood; the stench of fresh blood reacting to the penetrating tropical sun permeated the fields. In contrast, old graves could be identified by a depression in the ground because the bodies forming in the mound had decayed to simply bones?”134 It seems more likely that she relied on others’ recollections. What Seng includes may have been true, that is, “the new graves heaved up in a mound and oozed blood,” but in all probability, this is not her own recollection. It is difficult not only to judge how Seng experienced the genocide, but also how she later remembered it. Indeed, had the author relied only on her memories, as fragmented as they were, the testimonial would have appeared more authentic and credible, and thus a better candidate for historiographical integration.

This is not to say that Seng never distinguishes her memories from those of others she has integrated into her story. She often refers to how her brother, Mardi, remembered specific events. In describing Vietnam’s intervention, for instance, she quotes him as saying, “sometimes we had to sleep in trenches because of the artillery bombardment.”135 She also quotes from her aunt, who, though “built

134 Theary C. Seng, 36.
135 Theary C. Seng, 94.
like an elephant,” was abused by soldiers because she could not haul a bucket of water.\textsuperscript{136} Still, the infrequency of these distinctions concern the historian. Indeed, to establish a more gripping and coherent narrative, one that presumably details her particular experience, did Seng ever chose \textit{not} to make these important distinctions? One must constantly pose such questions to extract the most accurate information.

Whereas Seng admits to the fallibility of memory, Him, ten when the killings began, presents her account as a flawless recollection.\textsuperscript{137} “I invite the memories back in, apprehensive but hungry for them,” she explains in the preface, not concerned that her memory has likely faded over time.\textsuperscript{138} The impressive detail in her account, that is, brings into question its credibility and authenticity. It seems unlikely that Him, only a child, could recall with such precision the conditions she was forced to endure:

The sun penetrates through the cracks of my shack. Alone, I curl up, covered by a scarf; my eyes fix upon the fine particles of dust that drift through the morning light. Most of the day, I lie here, staring into the dark until I tire. The next day the sun rises, and my eyes return to the twirling dust, again awaiting the blanket of night. I think, but I’m not sure what I’m thinking. I don’t remember how I arrived here — a labor camp, I don’t even know its name.\textsuperscript{139}

One has a difficult time believing that Him recalls watching the “fine particles of dust,” and how her eyes would return each morning to the “twirling dust.” More likely the description includes some fiction, and though the essence of Him’s point remains intact — confusion about her location — the historian wonders what else

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{ThearyC.Seng101} Theary C. Seng, 101.
\bibitem{ThearyC.Seng23} Theary C. Seng, 23.
\bibitem{Him25} Him, 25.
\bibitem{Him201} Him, 201.
\end{thebibliography}
has been fabricated. That this passage appears particularly questionable, despite its insignificance to Him’s complete experience, deters the historian from considering the account.

Similar scrutiny must be applied to Loung Ung’s account, *First They Killed My Father*. Only seven years old when transported to children’s military camp, she nonetheless writes her story with intricate detail. Educated and wealthy citizens were thought tainted, hostile to the Khmer Rouge. Soldiers were then recruited from the poorest sections as “blank minds,” more easily persuaded to support the genocide. Thrilled with having power, in fact, many young people carried out the killings.

Ung includes the exact number of girls camped in her bunk, 80, and recalls the first night, “gathered around a roaring bonfire to listen to the latest propaganda.”140 Also questionable is the author’s sense of time. Each chapter opens with a new month, implying that Ung recalls about when specific events actually occurred. In August 1977, for example, she explains how the Khmer Rouge increased the camp’s daily food rations. Children also stop teasing her around this time, since she had proven herself a “good fighter and hard worker.”141 In May 1978, though, Ung explains how supplies grew short, leaving many weak, tired, and sick: “My stomach and feet swell as my bones protrude everywhere else. In the morning I find myself short of breath just walking to the rice fields.”142 One should question how a child, who did not keep a diary, years later may then recall these facts.

---

141 Hung., 129.  
142 Hung, 151.
Molyda Szymusiak’s *The Stones Cry Out*, also one of the first published testimonials of the genocide, offers a similar account. After the Khmer Rouge seize the capital, nine-year-old Szymusiak and her family are forced to flee to the countryside. Here the author endures hunger and sickness, and witnesses brutal acts of murder. Like Ung, she is separated from her family and transported to a children’s military camp. As Ung’s account, *The Stones Cry Out* suffers from the same defect. One has a difficult time believing how, years afterward, Szymusiak could retain such a precise knowledge of when specific events occurred. The author employs such terms as “the next day,” “that night,” “that morning,” “that afternoon,” and “it was long past midday” to maintain a strict, linear narrative. The testimonial loses much of its authenticity, giving the historian more cause to ignore it.

In comparison to Rwandan survivors, though, their Cambodian counterparts receive more practical writing assistance. The former relies on questionable help from others, but this issue appears significantly less dubious in regard to the latter — at least pertaining to my sample of written accounts. In Someth May’s *Cambodian Witness*, the author receives assistance from James Fenton, a political and literary commentator. May’s story presents itself as extraordinary and harrowing, about an aspiring doctor forced to flee Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge take power. In rich detail, he explains the conditions of his survival, and how he endured a multitude of brutal labor camps and uncomfortable hiding places. In 1979, May manages to makes it to the Thai-Cambodian border, but only with four of his family of fourteen. The authenticity of this account remains intact, as Fenton explains:
We could have taken short cuts — a tape-recorder and a ghost-writer — as one might with a busy politician and film star. But to do real justice to the experience, it was necessary for Someth to learn both English and the art of writing simultaneously. One the intermediate drafts, he was helped with points of grammar and expression, and it has only been at the final stage that I have been more directly involved in reshaping the already rich material. It has been a happy as well as a harrowing experience, and I am convinced that only this method could have secured the unique quality of what follows.\footnote{Someth May. *Cambodian Witness: The Autobiography of Someth May.* (Random House, 1986) 15-16.}

A number of Cambodian genocide testimonials are written only by the survivor, translated into English by an outside party, or produced with help that Felton has provided for May: Ngor’s *A Cambodian Odyssey*, Szymusiak’s *The Stones Cry Out*, Pin Yathay’s *Stay Alive My Son*, and Ly Y’s *Heaven Becomes Hell*. In comparison to Rwandan accounts, in this respect, historians should display significantly more willingness to integrate Cambodian accounts into historiography.
The Applicability of Holocaust, Rwandan, and Cambodian Testimonials

While it may be difficult for victims and survivors of the Holocaust to document the undisputed factuality of their experiences in narrative, they can document very well the manner in which they grasped and responded to their experiences at that time.\textsuperscript{144} — James E. Young

We are in fact convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analyses, and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world which we are describing.\textsuperscript{145} — Primo Levi.

\textsuperscript{144} Young, 32.
Now that problems with assessing testimonials have been explored, we will briefly examine their strengths. By exploring a select number of accounts from the three cases of genocide under review, their practical use for historians should become more apparent. This section suggests that survivor accounts, while flawed to varying degrees, prove much more useful than one may expect. Credibility and authenticity should be determined by 1) writing style, 2) descriptiveness, and 3) cross-checking how much a testimonial from a specific genocide has in common with other accounts.

**Primo Levi as premier writer**

The contributions of Primo Levi remain the most widely read Holocaust testimonials. Indeed, most historians, exceptionally, are unwilling to integrate his genocide account into their history. Many cite his vast body of work to incorporate clarity in the events and experiences of the Shoah. According to Kramer, Levi is one of the few “survivor-writers whose literary devices assure that greatest communicability of his text without compromising the intimate nature of his memoir.”

Multiple volumes have examined Levi’s genocide testimonials, detailing this survivor’s superior abilities. In “The Haunted Journey of Primo Levi” Gian Paolo Biasin analyses the first chapter of *Survival in Auschwitz*, “The Journey.” He explains that Levi’s language proves astonishingly effective “in conveying not just shame, which was so torturous for the victims with its components of sense of guilt, impotence, and outrage, but also their other, mixed, strong emotions.”

---

146 Kemer, x.
Indeed, these qualities are seen in Levi’s description of the horrific joinery to the Lager:

We suffered from thirst and cold: at every stop we clamored for water, or even a handful of snow, but we were rarely heard; the soldiers of the escort drove off anybody who tried to approach the convoy. Two young mothers, nursing their children, groaned night and day, begging for water. Our state of nervous tension made the hunger, exhaustion and lack of sleep seem less of a torment. But the hours of darkness and torment were without end.149

Biasin offers a convincing explanation for Levi’s advanced talent to portray his experiences. The survivor’s background in chemistry was accompanied by classical education, which included the cannon of great Italian writers: “From Dante to Tasso, from Galileo to Manzoni, as well as non-Italians of the western tradition, from Homer and Virgil to Rabelais and Descrates, from Balzac to Tolstoy.”150 As a chemist, a keen observer of fact, Levi also had a strong foundation in literature. He utilized both arsenals of knowledge, resulting in such praiseworthy testimonials. In The Drowned and The Saved, for example, Levi is influenced by Dante’s Inferno. He describes the Lager, and how its “torment of body and spirit” was “mythical and Dantesque.”151

Another intriguing factor is that Levi displays no expression of hate toward the Germans. This allows the historian to obtain a more objective account of survival in the Lager, to see what actually occurred without extreme emotion. In Levi’s 1976 afterword to Survival in Auschwitz, he says that his “temperament is not inclined toward hatred,” which he regards as “bestial” and “crude.” He prefers

149 Levi, 18.
150 Biasin, 3.
151 Levi, The Drowned and The Saved, 121.
that his “actions and thoughts, as far as possible, should be the product of reason.”\textsuperscript{152} That is, Levi is more concerned with documenting fact, what he observed and who suffered, than including in his narrative emotions that may deter from this aim.

Cambodian genocide accounts, similarities with Levi

Ung’s testimonial shares much in common with Levi’s writing style. Here, too, the author displays an impressive ability. Something must be said for the fact that Ung is also well-educated, and as national spokesperson for the Campaign for a Landmine Free World, has superior communication skills. Like Levi, she tells her story in the first-person, and seems as concerned with chronicling the collective experience — how others survived, or not. Ung explains that when she first began writing, however, she wrote in the past tense to “distance [herself] from the pain,” yet she discovered that this distanced the reader as well.\textsuperscript{153} She decides to switch to the present tense, and endure the “extreme emotional toll” of reliving her experience.\textsuperscript{154} Despite its defects, \textit{First They Killed My Father} proves more credible because of this decision, as well as Ung’s willingness to suffer through recording her survival.

Significant and striking similarities exist between Levi and Ung’s writing style. Both use long, descriptive prose in describing the dehumanization that not just they, but others were forced to endure. In doing so, they do not glorify or present themselves as heroes, which may indicate that some fiction has been included:

\textsuperscript{152} Levi, \textit{Survival in Auschwitz}, ii.
\textsuperscript{153} Ung, afterword, 6.
\textsuperscript{154} Ung, afterword, 7
Another six months have passed since our family reunion at the infirmary. Back at the camp, our life continues as before and with another increase in food rations, I become still stronger. We no longer work in the fields but spend the hours learning to fight in combat as rumors spread that Youns having invaded our borders. During the day, we train with the few sickles, hoes, knives, stakes, and guns that are available in the camp. Most of the training is repetitive, but Met Bong insists that only when the movements become automatic will we be able to fight well. In the evening, after our meal, we gather brush and sticks to build a scene around our camp.\textsuperscript{155}

Ung excludes the words “I” of “my” from this passage, focusing on the collective experience. As if the children are machines, the author explains how they conduct endless chores and training exercises. They can no longer think for themselves, and as property of the state, their actions are determined by the Khmer Rouge. Any sense of individuality has been decimated, replaced with a powerful collective suffering.

It must be not later than 11 p.m. because the movement to and from the bucket next to the night-gaurd is already intense. It is an obscene torment and an indelible shame: every two or three hours we have to get up to discharge ourselves of the great dose of water which during the day we are forced to absorb in the form of soup in order to satisfy our hunger: that same water which in the evenings swells our ankles and the hollows of our eyes, conferring on all physiognomies a likeness of deformation, and whose elimination imposes an enervating toil on our kidneys.\textsuperscript{156}

Levi also writes about the circumstances of collective suffering, though in a much different setting, as a prisoner in Auschwitz. Yet here as well, the victims are described as machines, living under horrific conditions. As their bodies are destroyed from malnutrition and disease, dehumanization also plagues their

\textsuperscript{155} Ung., 158.
consciousness. Both authors are concerned with documenting the immense suffering endured under the Nazis and Khmer Rouge, not self-glorification. Since Ung displays some qualities that Levi is so often praised for, it is at least somewhat baffling that even in the most recent historiography, Ung’s account is not cited.

A related tragedy, however, is that a definitive history of the Cambodian genocide remains to be written. Most studies are restricted to articles or chapters, as in Samantha Power’s welcome A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide. A synthesis comparable to Leni Yahil’s The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry does not exist. This neglect deserves another investigation, but major volumes that have been published, including Philip Short’s Pol Plot: Anatomy of a Nightmare and Nic Dunlop’s The Lost Executioner: A Story of the Khmer Rouge, not once cite from Ung, and only very rarely other Cambodian survivors. Short and Dunlop restrict their references to Pol Pot’s generals, and others who worked closely with him. Of course, both authors aim to describe the character of the Khmer Rouge, not the experiences of their victims. With a rich base of source material, however, it is baffling that not more historians have realized the necessity for an authoritative, integrated account of this genocide. This proves especially the case when considering the work of Haing Ngor, another Cambodian genocide survivor who shares much in common with Levi. Ngor was also involved in science, working as a surgeon and obstetrician in the capital. When the Khmer Rouge took power, however, he concealed his identity and evacuated with his pregnant wife, My-Huoy. In A Cambodian Odyssey, Ngor regrets not having been able to save Huoy, who required an emergency procedure to spare herself and the
baby, who suffocated inside her. He devotes an entire chapters to this event, “Grief,” in which he laments his inability to do more. “If I had just tried with a knife I could have gotten the child out,” he writes. Ngor continues to torment himself, thinking: “No blood supply, no surgical tools, no antibiotics! Shed was so weak! I just couldn't do it. ‘All right!’ I shouted, out loud. ‘It’s my fault! I panicked! I admit it!’”

His sadness seems tangible. One readily believes that this is how Ngor truly felt. Ngor sustains this level of credibility throughout his 466-page testimonial, and never does the reader doubt the author’s suffering and sincerity. Unlike other Cambodian genocide memoirists, Ngor not only survived the atrocity as an adult, but he began writing in the early 1980s, when his memory was most fresh.

Indeed, Ngor’s account exudes the same blunt honesty so often praised in Levi’s work. He describes how he is at the mercy of the Khmer Rouge, forced to forfeit his humanity. In one particularly effective chapter, “Rice Farming,” Ngor explains what is expected of him each day — much in the same fashion as Levi does in *Survival in Auschwitz*. As Levi describes the torment of carrying heavy, cast-iron cylinders with a weak partner, Ngor describes the “backbreaking” task of using an old technique to farm rice: “Standing with our knees bent, we grabbed a few rice shoots at a time with a circular motion.”

While both authors try to retain hope that things may improve, that they may become free once more, they expect their demise. Due to hard labor, food shortages and unsanitary conditions, from his normal weight of 135 to 140 pounds, Ngor drops to 100: “I knew I was very, very, very sick.”

Ngor explains how he wasn’t the only ill person, that most people in

---

158 Ngor, 269.
159 Ngor, 170.
Phum Chhleav were sick, and that each day processions wound through the pathways of the village on the way to the burial grounds. Malnutrition proved the greatest contributing factor: “The Khmer Rouge fed us a bowl of salty broth with a few spoonful of rice at the bottom for lunch, the same for dinner. That was all. Without proper nutrition, we weakened.”\(^\text{160}\) Similarly, Levi also writes how hunger destroys prisoners: “The lager is hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger.”\(^\text{161}\) If this did not always kill, Levi explains, it drove away humanity and decency. In trying to obtain food, prisoners lied and stole from each other. Yet Levi poses an interesting question: “How much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire.”\(^\text{162}\) As historians appear more willing to examine Levi’s works, they should recognize that his characteristics are shared by Cambodian survivor-writers.

**Accuracy through cross-examination of Cambodian testimonials**

Historians should also utilize cross-checking to judge historical veracity, determining what most accounts have in common. If a description deviates from established characteristics, this may indicate that that passage has been fabricated, at least in part. I have not read enough Cambodian genocide testimonials to determine such qualifications, and perhaps too few have been written. From the several accounts I have examined, however, it is noteworthy that in describing the evacuation from Phnom Penh, the survivor-writers record similar experiences and descriptions. From Ngor’s *A Cambodian Odyssey* to Him’s *When Broken Glass Floats*, this event proves especially fresh in the survivor-writer’s mind. Even those

\(^{160}\) Ngor, 171.  
who survived the genocide as children, including Him, Ung, and Seng, demonstrate a more convincing recollection. This seems logical enough, as the evacuation was the starting marker of the horrors that would ensue. Yet historians have not made this realization.

One effective comparison exists between Him and Ngor’s accounts, both of which explain the horrors of the evacuation out of Phnom Penh. Ngor describes a long line forming at the bridge near National Route 2, and with armed soldiers watching, “there was nothing to do but move on with the sluggish flow of the crowd.” At the base of the bridge Ngor sees floating bodies in army uniforms. He even recognizes one of them, “a well-known Phnom Penh night-club singer who had displeased the new authorities.” He says he tries to ignore them, but that this proves difficult when a fancy car crashes into the river. As the current drives the vehicle downstream, and Ngor gets a better look, he notices that the people inside do not bother to get out, and that all of the doors and windows remain closed: “Gradually the car sank lower and lower until only the roof was above the water. We just stared, as the car settled lower and the waters closed over the roof. A rich family committing suicide.” Him also explains how thousands waited to cross the bridge, “like solid matter jamming the neck of a bottle,” and continues to describe the river of people leaving the city: “Those who don’t have vehicles to transport their belongings carry them, baskets and bundles of possessions tied to both ends of a long stick and balanced on their shoulders.” Also, like others, she views more shocking incidents. An elderly man asks a Khmer Rouge soldier if he may return home, and is shot.

163 Ngor, 96.
164 Ibid., 96.
165 Ibid., 96.
166 Him, 67.
Similar imagery is employed by Mardi Seng in his short account, *Hope*. Indeed, he also describes traveling out of the city, and how the “streets were filled with a sea of faces.” Seng does not mention crossing a bridge, but like Him and Ngor — besides noticing the suffering of tired and hungry travelers — he describes other brutal acts. When Seng’s grandfather suggests that the family take a break in an abandoned home, they discover a family of five — dead inside from multiple gun shots. After spending a night, Seng goes outside to fetch some water from a nearby well. He sees a boy, not much older than he, 10 or so, wearing a green camouflage shirt: “A Khmer Rouge soldier walked up to the boy, pulled him by the collar, put his pistol against the boy’s head, and fired.” Seng recalls how during the third day of traveling, the Khmer Rouge requested that previous government workers, army officers, and educated men join the new regime to rebuild Cambodia. On April 20, 1975, Seng’s father volunteers for service and is not heard from again.

Of course, cross-checking does not provide a perfect method for determining an account’s authenticity and credibility. Survivors may convincingly write that they remember specific events, when in fact they are relying on others’ accounts, imagining what something could have been like. However, this does not mean that cross-checking is a wholly ineffective tool. Something must be said for consistencies that exist throughout accounts, how survivors recall specific occurrences. The challenge lay in the historian devoting sufficient time and attention to locating these consistencies, that is, where survivor-writers include similar recollections. Once guidelines have been established for each act of genocide, historians may more easily locate descriptions that appear most accurate and credible.

---

Rwandan genocide accounts, similarities with Levi

As has been explained, historians have most reason to hesitate integrating Rwandan genocide testimonials into historiography. Indeed, only a handful have been written, making cross-checking significantly less likely to bear useful results. Also, most accounts suffer from self-glorification — bringing into question how similar they are with Levi’s work. True, Ilibagiza and Ndamyumugabe had had some higher-education. The former spent three years at the National University in Butare, and the other had sufficient knowledge to teach at a secondary school in Kigali. However, both lack the Holocaust survivor’s keen insight, blunt honesty, and fluid and captivating writing. As such, they share little with Levi, specifically in how they recalled their experiences.

Yet in reviewing the limited literature, Rusesabagina's *An Ordinary Man* stands out as an exception. His style seems selfless, and the reader senses the candor of his words:

Today I am convinced that the only thing that saved those 1,268 people in my hotel was words. Not the liquor, not money, not the UN. Just ordinary words directed against the darkness. They are so important. I used words in many ways during the genocide — to plead, intimidate, coax, cajole, and negotiate... I am nothing more or less than a hotel manager, trained to negotiate contracts and charged to give shelter to those in need... I did what I believed to be the ordinary things that an ordinary man would do. I said no to outrageous actions the way I thought that anybody would, and it still mystifies me that so many others could say yes.168

Rusesabagina tells his story because he wants it to be told, to be remembered, not because he wants to persuade others to believe in God, or to have some spiritual epiphany. The reader senses the authenticity of this powerful testimonial, that the

survivor has no ulterior motives in recalling his experience. The same humbleness is present throughout Levi’s contributions, including his *The Drowned and The Saved*.

I must repeat: we, the survivors are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the “Muslims,” the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception. 169

In this respect, Levi and Rusesabagina share a similar mentality. Indeed, both believe that they are not unique, merely fortunate enough to record their experiences. The historian notices how willing they are to downplay their elite stature, achieved by surviving Auschwitz or saving innocent lives during the acts of genocide. Whereas Rusesabagina believes that he is “nothing more than a hotel manager,” Levi believes that because he did not perish under the Nazis, he himself is not a “true witness.” This humbleness proves a crucial factor, indicating that for whatever these survivors write, they have less reason to exaggerate or fabricate. Rusesabagina and Levi are concerned with informing readers of the facts, the circumstances of their survival, not with using their accounts to promote themselves.

Despite their similarities, one should note that these two survivors employ distinct writing techniques. Yet they exude the same qualities — profoundness and

---

credibility. Rusesabagina’s prose proves most concise. Indeed, only rarely do his sentences run over three lines. This improves the narrative’s flow, making it easier to comprehend, but pointedness also increases the account’s potency. For example, Rusesabagina states: “Nobody was wounded or beaten upon the Mille Collines. I was doing the job that I had been entrusted to do by the Sabena Corporation — that was my greatest and only pride in the manner.” In the following paragraph, he writes only five words: “I am a hotel manager.” This set-up produces a profound and dramatic result, amplifying how Rusesabagina recalls his survival experience. By contrast, Levi’s prose reads more poetically than Rusesabagina’s. Indeed, he includes longer sentences to sustain lasting and powerful emotion. Levi explains the Market, where prisoners exchanged goods with one another:

Here scores of prisoners drove desperate by hunger prowl around, with lips half open and eyes gleaming, lured by a deceptive instinct to where the merchandise shown makes the gnawing of their stomachs more acute and their salvation more assiduous. In the best cases they posses a miserable half-ration of bread which, with painful effort, they have saved since the morning, in the senseless hope of a chance to make an advantageous bargain with some ingenious person, unaware of the process of the moment.

A master of language, Levi’s lengthy prose does not harm the effectiveness of his account, which so well describes the suffering endured at Auschwitz. Nor does it hinder the reader’s comprehension. Rather, his structure appears purposeful, representing the endless misery that he and others endured at the concentration camp.

170 Rusesabagina, 131.
171 Levi, Survival in Auschwitz, 78.
Integration of Rwandan genocide testimonials

One has most reason to hesitate integrating Rwandan genocide accounts into historiography. It is surprising, then, that though Cambodian genocide testimonials are significantly more reliable, more contributions have included the Rwandan genocide victim’s voice. Perhaps this is because the Rwandan genocide occurred more recently, and received more press coverage than the Cambodian genocide. Or, perhaps in the post-Cold War period, another genocide occurring seemed more interesting. Whatever the reason, though, it is intriguing that many contributions have not been written by historians, but, rather, by journalists and civil rights activists.

In this vein, *Genocide in Rwanda: A Collective Memory* is a creative collaboration by John A. Berry and Carol Pott Berry. Living in Kigali, the couple evacuated with other Americans before the genocide gained momentum. Once safe inside the United States, John and Carol wrote articles for major newspapers, detailing their experience of having hidden a Tutsi family. The Berrys returned to Rwanda after the killings ceased, and invited a range of speakers to attend a conference to discuss the causes of the horror that had just ravaged the once-peaceful nation. The conference included “witness testimony and historical, political, social, cultural, demographic, and legal perspectives on the genocide.”

This volume derives from that conference, and is a welcome study that respects the victim’s voice.

*New Yorker* writer Philp Gourevitch offers another integrated account of the Rwandan genocide. Instead of providing a linear history, he includes a number of stories about the suffering endured during the killings. His writing is not historical,

---

but journalistic — resembling a collection of features ready for publication. He includes quotations from Odette Nyiramilimo, an elderly Tutsi woman. She recalls the end of the genocide, when she suffered from a reoccurring dream: “We were fleeing, people shooting left and right, airplanes strafing, everything burning.”

Gourevitch also writes about the survival of Bonaventure Nyibizi, a Tutsi man who believed that he and his family would die: “So we decided that instead of being killed by a machete, we’d choose to be killed by a grenade or by being shot. We took my car and drove outside my compound. We were able to make it up to the church of Sainte Famille.” Bonaventure and his family survive, thanks to hiding in a small room where the killers did not look. These voices contribute to history, describing how, even amidst massive violence, some Tutsis and moderate Hutus managed to survive. Gourevitch’s contribution is not meant to be treated as a work of history. Indeed, it is a piece of excellent journalism. Yet historians should follow his lead.

---

173 Philip Gourevitch. *We Wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda.* (Picador, 1998), 197.
174 Gourevitch, 124.
Avenues for future comparisons: Why survivors feel the need to record

Writing for me is a way of seeking revenge. It’s something I feel I must do, to move forward. The genocide is a part of me, and because the trials in Cambodia are a farce, this is my way of seeking retribution. This is my way of seeking justice. — Mardi Seng175

I have an inner awareness that I am fulfilling a national obligation... My words are not rewritten, momentary reflexes shape them. Perhaps their value lies in this... My record will serve as source material for the future historian. — Chaim A. Kaplan176

If in reading this story people would credit God for his miraculous survival, Phodidas believes that sharing his story may not have been in vain. — Nkosiyabo Zvandasara.177

---

175 Interview with Mardi Seng, Nov. 8, 2006.
177 Zvandasara’s introduction to Ndamyumugabe, 10.
I could locate no study comparing why some survivors from different acts of genocide feel that they must record their experiences. This is indeed unfortunate, as it would be useful to understand why these accounts, whose style, structure, and quality vary, are ever written. This subject remains uncharted territory for psychologists and psychohistorians, qualified to determine the base of motivations of survivor-writers. So far, analyses has relied on basic historical and literary observations. However, I lack even elementary knowledge in psychohistory. Hence, I do not propose to provide detailed conclusions in this section. Rather, by examining my sample of accounts, I provide a starting point for those willing and able to continue this research. In this respect, I should note that I refrain from writing about Rwandan genocide testimonials, again, since so few have been published or written.

Cambodian genocide survivor-writers

Mardi Seng wrote his account as a homework assignment more than 20 years ago. It is short, no more than ten pages — but it is quite powerful. Mardi leans back, thinking about why he decided to write anything in the first place. He assures me that he has no room left in his heart for hatred, and that he has seen too many fellow survivors become “completely consumed by anger.” In answering, he tells about one of his trips to Cambodia — which he makes almost every year: “Once, I returned to a village where the Khmer Rouge had kept prisoners, and I was serving some food there. I noticed a man come up to me, and I recognized him right away. He was a Khmer Rouge soldier who had tormented my family. I didn’t say anything though. I just decided to serve him his food, and he walked away.”[178]
Mardi explains that by hating those who carried out the killings, he would have been unable to heal, to move on. Thus, his intention in writing the account was not malevolent. Rather, Mardi explains, “it was a way for me to reveal my emotions, to say ‘hey, this happened, and I seek some justice.’” He believes that hatred and a yearning for justice are different emotions, and that he had intended his story to express the latter. As the perpetrators evade retribution, however, he grows more frustrated.

Him, in her preface to *When Broken Glass Floats*, explains similar reasons for writing. She manages to vent some of her anger by working for the Khmer Adolescent Project, where she studies post-traumatic stress disorder among Cambodians

I also like to think that telling my story and assisting the PTSD studies are my way of avenging the Khmer Rouge. It is also my way of opposing governments that have inflicted pain and suffering on innocent children, whose trust has been exploited time and time again throughout history: during the Khmer Rouge era, the Nazi era, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and, more recently, amid the ethnic aggression and bloodshed in Bosnia and Rwanda.

Similarly, May clearly demonstrates that vengeance is her primary reason for recording her experience. By telling her account, she is seeking at least some justice.

My experiences were no different from those of my family and friends. Any of us could tell the same story. But unlike so many of us I managed to survive. The revolution forced me to become a liar, a thief, a smuggler, a classical dancer, a refugee and finally a stateless person. And now that I have survived I want to tell the story, exactly as it happened.

---

179 Interview with Mardi Seng, Nov. 8, 2006.
180 Him, 21.
181 May, 18.
Perhaps vengeance proves most paramount among Cambodian genocide survivors because no tribunals have been established — at least ones that have carried out sentences. Pol Pot and Leng Sary, who had acted as the deputy prime minister during the Khmer Rouge regime, were both tried in the capital on August 1979. An American specializing in international law, John Quigley was invited to participate in the proceedings, mostly “for the evident reason of reflecting international standards of justice and thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the proceedings.” But the trial was held in absentia, with both defendants having fled the country.

When Pot resurfaced in 1997, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright supported the formation of an international war crimes tribunal to judge him. However, the former dictator died of a heart-attack before the plan could proceed. This ruled out the possibility of a trial held under international law for crimes against humanity. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, upon hearing of the death, declared that he shared “the continuing anguish of the Cambodian people who suffered terribly under Pol Pot’s rule, as well as their wish that justice ultimately be served on those who share his guilt for one of history’s most notorious reigns of terror.”

Yet these sentiments have done little to console survivors. Other Khmer Rouge leaders have since died, including the former military commander Ta Mok. Mardi says that he is not comforted by the Cambodian government’s intent to establish its own tribunal. Judges are suspected to have ties with former Khmer Rouge commanders, and because the proceedings are set to occur in the capital,

183 De Nike, Quigley and Robinson, 2.
184 Kofi Annan quoted in De Nike, Quigley and Robinson, 16.
witnesses will have to risk their own lives to attend: “How are survivors going to be able to testify? In fact, there are still so many former Khmer Rouge in the country, or wealthy people with connections to them. The government will not allow the trial to go forward in a fair and expeditious manner.” Another problem is who will be tried, and Mardi fears that perpetrators will remain unpunished. Unable to win justice inside the courtroom, his words serve as consolation. “At least I can tell my story,” he said.

**Holocaust survivor-writers**

Where Cambodian survivor-writers are more concerned with revenge, using their accounts to attack the Khmer Rouge, Holocaust survivor-writers are more concerned with preserving the historical record — ensuring that the memory of the genocide will not soon dissipate. In an insightful introduction to Abraham Lewin’s Warsaw Diary, *A Cup of Tears*, Antony Polonsky quotes an entry made 6 June 1942:

> In these tragic times, wherever several Jews gather together and each recounts just a part of what he has heard and seen, it becomes a mountain or a swollen sea of misfortune and Jewish blood. Jewish blood pure and simple. We gather every Sabbath, a group of activists in the Jewish community, to discuss our diaries and writings. We want our sufferings, these ‘birth-pangs of the Messiah’, to be impressed upon the memories of future generations and on the memory of the whole world.

This is not to say that Lewin did not at all intend to punish the Nazis with his writings. As Polonsky keenly observes, the murder of children aroused Lewin’s

---

185 Interview with Mardi Seng, Nov. 8, 2006.
186 Lewin, *A Cup of Tears*, 120
anger, leading him to seek “vengeance for this, for the blood of a small child, the devil himself has not created.”\textsuperscript{187} Despite this, Lewin seems more worried about the preservation of memory. Indeed, he appears obsessed with the notion of explaining his suffering, and worries that the rest of the world “cannot imagine our bitter situation,” that “they will not understand and not believe that day after day thousands of men, women and children, innocent of any crime, were taken to their death.”\textsuperscript{188}

Chaim A. Kaplan expresses even stronger sentiments in his Warsaw diary, translated from Hebrew by Abraham I. Katsh. In another useful introduction, Katsh includes a quote that describes the survivor’s drive to record everything around him.

> The whole nation is sinking in a sea of horror and cruelty... I do not know whether anyone else is recording the daily events. The conditions of life which surround us are not conducive to such literary labors... Anyone who keeps such a record endangers his life, but this doesn’t alarm me. I sense within me the magnitude of this hour and my responsibility to it. I have an inner awareness that I am fulfilling a national obligation... My words are no rewritten, momentary reflexes shape them. Perhaps their value lies in this... My record will serve as source material for the future historian.\textsuperscript{189}

Since the Nazis swore to destroy memory of the Holocaust, this appears to have been why more survivor-writers are concerned with recording and writing down their experiences. In \textit{The Drowned and the Saved}, Levi quotes a passage from Simon Weisenthal’s \textit{The Murderers Are Among Us}, in which he remembers the SS taunting prisoners: “However this war may end, we have won the war against you;

\textsuperscript{187} Polonsky’s introduction, \textit{A Cup of Tears}, 31.
\textsuperscript{188} Lewin quoted in Polonsky’s introduction, \textit{A Cup of Tears}, 1.
\textsuperscript{189} Katch’s introduction, \textit{The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan}, 9.
none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world would not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you... We will be the ones to dictate the history of the lager.” Fortunately, the Nazis failed, and thousands of survivor testimonials exist.
Concluding Thoughts

The “history of the Holocaust” cannot be limited to a recounting of German policies, decisions, and measures that led to this most systematic and sustained of genocides; it must include the reactions (and at times the initiatives) of the surrounding world and the attitudes of the victims, for the fundamental reasons that the events we call the Holocaust represent a totality defined by this very convergence of ideas.\textsuperscript{191}

Last month, bookstores received the sequel to Friedlander’s groundbreaking volume, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*. It concentrates on the years of extermination, from 1930 to 1945. Written in clear and engaging prose, it proves the most brilliant example of how historians might effectively integrate the victim’s experience into historiography. In the introduction, the author explains the importance of survivor voices:

They describe in great detail the initiatives and daily brutality of the perpetrators, the reactions of populations, and the life and destruction of populations, and the life and destruction of their own communities, but they also record their own everyday world: Intense expressions of hope and illusions surface; the wildest rumors, the most fantastic interpretations of the events are considered plausible, at least for a while. For many the catastrophic events also become a test of their former beliefs, or the depth and significance of their ideological or religious commitments, or the values that guided their lives.192

Despite these obvious benefits, many historians remain apprehensive about considering Holocaust testimonials. With the “immense troves of material” emanating from the former Soviet and Eastern bloc countries — in significant detail, revealing the policies and measures of the Nazi regime — fewer historians have studied the victim’s experience.193 Historians have proceeded too hastily, examining new material without first understanding the methods to best scrutinize survivor accounts. We must step back, reconsider our approach. Indeed, if we are to produce more useful contributions, they must not only respect the victim’s voice, but be able to place this voice into a wider context of whatever new findings may be disclosed. One cannot understand the Holocaust without considering its victims.

---

The same holds true for other acts of genocide, including the ones in Rwanda and Cambodia, and this study has attempted to provide a template, a guide of how to scrutinize various genocide testimonials more effectively. In locating potential drawbacks, I have not intended to dissuade scholars from examining survivor accounts. On the contrary, by employing caution, I hope to encourage the integration of the victim’s voice.

I have suggested that while exceptions certainly exist, testimonials from one genocide share qualities distinct from those from another act of genocide. Depending on the genocide and account under examination, historians should display more or less concern about integration. For example, most Holocaust testimonials have been written by the victims themselves, with little or no outside assistance. Many Rwandan genocide testimonials, however, have been produced with the aid of journalists and civil rights activists, such as Ilibagiza’s *Left to Tell* and Ndamyumugabe’s *Beyond Wildest Imagination*. Many Cambodian genocide accounts, for their part, have been written by those who survived the ordeal as children, written years afterward, including Ung’s *First they Killed my Father* and Seng’s *Daughter of the Killing Fields*. Indeed, authenticity and credibility prove more problematic in the latter two instances than with Holocaust testimonials — written during the years of extermination or shortly thereafter — like Lewin’s *Warsaw Diary* and Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*. As such, Holocaust accounts are the most reliable survivor narratives, at least compared to my chosen sample of Rwandan and Cambodian testimonials.

I proceeded by promoting cross-checking to extract the most credible information. That is, when various accounts explain the same incident in similar
detail, like the evacuation of Phnom Penh, this is a good indication that a particular passage is credible. Since Levi is lauded as the most reliable survivor-writer, I also show that other survivor-writers, from different acts of genocide, share some of his praiseworthy characteristics. As such, depending on which account historians are examining, testimonials prove of varying usefulness. In this regard, integrating Rwandan genocide accounts into historiography appears most daunting, mostly because so few have been published, and those that do exist suffer from more significant drawbacks. Yet, this does not mean that these documents should be completely disregarded, considered wholly useless. Rather, we must take the extreme care needed to examine them, sifting through the silt to discover their full potential.

More historians must examine genocide testimonials. Yet, if sufficient progress it to be made toward integration, psychologists and psychohistorians must become involved. Indeed, we must better understand the motivations for why survivor-writers feel that they must record. Certainly, all survivors harbor similar reasons for writing, but is one emotion more pronounced than another? If so, what does this mean for determining credibility and authenticity? Does vengeance lend to exaggeration, while a longing to remember signifies more objective, rational thinking? Time is of the utmost importance, as many Holocaust survivors are passing. We must foster a dialogue with survivor-writers before it is too late, and speculation remains forever. This calls for tremendous effort. Once underway, however, it would prove quite useful in helping historiants reconstruct these atrocities.