



# The subject of ashes

Kitty S. Millet San Francisco State University

kmillet1@sfsu.edu

## Abstract

This article has two aims: to examine the effects of victim proximity to crematoria ashes and ash pits both consciously and unconsciously in a subset of Holocaust survivors, those who were incarcerated at the dedicated death camps of Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, as well as Auschwitz-Birkenau; and to contrast these effects, the subject positions they produce, with their suppression as the basis both for a strategy of survival during incarceration and for a reimagined identity after the war. Within a cohort of four survivors from Rudolf Reder (Belzec), Esther Raab (Sobibor), Jacob Wiernik (Treblinka) and Shlomo Venezia (Auschwitz), I trace the ways in which discrete memories and senses became constitutive in the formation of the subject prior to and after escape – the experience of liberation – so that essentially two kinds of subjects became visible, the subject in liberation and the subject of ashes. In conjunction with these two kinds of subjects, I introduce the compensatory notion of a third path suggested both by H. G. Adler and Anna Orenstein, also Holocaust survivors, that holds both positions together in one space, the space of literature, preventing the two positions from being stranded in dialectical opposition to each other.

**Key words:** ashes, Holocaust, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz

When Anna Orenstein recalled her arrival at Auschwitz in 1944 she noted that ‘in a semiconscious state’, and ‘after several days in which she and about a hundred other human beings had been crammed . . . in a boxcar’, without food and water, without a toilet, incapable of movement, she noticed the smell of ash in the air. She didn’t know what it was, but it smelled ‘sweet’.<sup>1</sup> She was seventeen, yet, even in her recollection, that ‘sweet’ smell still punctuated the ‘several images’ that ‘converge in my memory’, and that ‘become superimposed on each other’. She remembered her ‘father disappearing in the crowd . . . her mother clutching her hand’, and then ‘a column formed itself’. The pull to lose the self and be absorbed in the column threatened to overtake her, but ‘her mother clutching her hand’ prevented her from being lost in the mass of victims.

Amid the 'constant shouts to hurry up', the unceasing march forward, she thought of her 'twenty-four year old cousin Margit who stood in line with us, but what had happened to her mother and seven year old sister . . . We must have gone through the selection but I wasn't aware of it.' In this short recollection, Orenstein's memory is punctuated by the absences of her father, Margit's family, juxtaposed to her own mother, 'clutching her hand'.<sup>2</sup>

Built from these unresolved fragments of memories, Orenstein returns an 'I' and a 'we' to the description of her arrival at Auschwitz.

I don't remember when or where we were forced to undress. We were now naked and out of doors for what seemed to be a long time. Next we sat on long benches, women in blue dresses standing behind us and cutting off our hair with long shears . . . Our bodies were cleaned of every bit of hair, head, underarms, pubic areas . . . We were herded into another barn-like structure. This was to be our living quarters but there were no cots here. We sat on the dirt floor for several days, maybe for a week. A constant heaviness hung in the air – and a sweet smell too. I overheard mother telling someone that the smoke and the smell came from the burning of human flesh.

'Can that be true?' I asked her.

'Oh no,' she said. 'That's just a rumor.'<sup>3</sup>

As Anna becomes conscious of her surroundings, her mother's overheard comments awaken her, but when Anna presses her about the origins of the smell, her mother, knowing the truth, lies to her daughter so that Anna can remain unaware of the significance of the 'sweet' smell.

In a subsequent interview Orenstein mentioned that when they had first arrived, in her semiconscious state she had previously asked her mother what was the smell around them. Her mother's response then was to tell her that they were making a nice dinner for them and not to think about it.<sup>4</sup> In retrospect, Anna knew then her mother's words were not true, but she chose to believe them in order to survive that moment on the platform, and the subsequent weeks.<sup>5</sup> In this case, Anna had to consciously suppress the knowledge of the smell's meaning and its effect on her senses, to believe an alternative fiction, in order to remain with her mother.

Orenstein's narrative identifies several important challenges confronting Anna as a survivor of a death camp: to remain a subject within the camps, she had to rely on an alternative fiction in order to survive, and that fiction acted to suppress the second realisation, that the Jews on the platforms had been transformed into the 'sweet smell' coming from the crematorium and deposited as its ashes. Her senses had to absorb this particular death phenomenologically. In response, Orenstein cordoned off the self from these ashes and their smell, essentially suppressing the testimony of her senses.

This article has two aims: to examine the role ashes play both consciously and unconsciously in a subset of Holocaust survivors, those who existed in proximity to gas chambers and crematoria; and to contrast that position with its rejection as the basis for a reimagined identity after the war. Within a cohort of four survivors, Rudolf Reder (Belzec), Esther Raab (Sobibor), Jacob Wiernik (Treblinka)

and Shlomo Venezia (Auschwitz), I trace the ways discrete memories and senses became constitutive in the formation of the subject after escape and/or liberation from death camps so that essentially two kinds of subjects become visible, the subject in liberation and the subject of ashes. In conjunction with these two kinds of subjects, I introduce the compensatory notion of a third path suggested by both H. G. Adler and Anna Orenstein, also Holocaust survivors, that holds both subject positions together in one space, the space of literature, preventing the two positions from being stranded in dialectical opposition to each other, incapable of addressing each other.

With exceptional proximity to the ash pits of Belzec, my first example, Rudolf Reder, provides the only complete account of any victim's experience there.<sup>6</sup> Recalling the tasks he was required to perform, their repetition 'every day, two to three times a day', he describes their imprint on his senses. At Belzec he dug ditches. He dug them knowing that they were to be filled with the 'cargo' from the transports arriving regularly, one of which had brought him to the camp.<sup>7</sup> When he arrived, he was removed from his transport and 'set aside' to dig burial pits for corpses with a small group of men. His group was but one in a larger detail of five hundred men, half of whom were unskilled labour, and all of whom were commandeered by the Nazis to provide the labour for the extermination of approximately 600,000 Jews. These groups or details were 'cargo' too, but, as Reder realised, that status would be applied to him belatedly, when the Nazis had no further use for him. He stood as a boundary between slave labour and anonymous cargo, slated for destruction. He existed in a transitional space before conversion to the cargo he was designated to become. Moreover, he was aware that his transformation remained incomplete as long as he existed as slave labour. His continued existence was contingent on his ability to be visible as slave labour.

When transports of Jews arrived, one officer, Irman, supervised at the platform the unloading of the 'cargo'. As the Jews were beaten and whipped out of the freight cars, he told them 'showers' awaited them, and then work.<sup>8</sup> Reder and his detail watched the Nazis separate the women and children from the men. The women were forced to run to the gas chambers, the path 'covered in blood', their 'cries in Polish and Yiddish', doors to the gas chambers shutting behind them.<sup>9</sup> The only variation on his memory was the realisation that, eventually, these cries were also in Czech, Greek and French. After their gassing, he would 'drag' the chamber's bodies to the pits, hidden in a forest, that he had previously dug with his detail. All the 'cargo' ended eventually in the same place, bodies he dragged from the gas chamber to the pits.

Reder also noted that Irman enjoyed shooting disabled Jews at the edges of the pits and then kicking their corpses into them.<sup>10</sup> He extended Irman's pleasure to all of the Nazis as they performed their duties; 'they were happy when they saw naked, wounded people thrust into the chamber. They were indifferent to the anguished cries of children.'<sup>11</sup> On another occasion Himmler and other SS watched Reder's detail drag corpses from the gas chambers. Later that evening, the Nazi guards celebrated, believing that they were entitled to rewards from Himmler for their

fulfilment of their duties at Belzec. These duties enabled them to express a Nazi national ethos.

To Reder, the memories suggested a collective experience of all Nazis assigned to Belzec. Implicitly, Reder understood that the Nazi subject at Belzec emerged through this collective experience of murder, while the Jewish subject experienced a collective dissolution. Standing between slave labour and dissolution, Reder became a subject of dying.<sup>12</sup> His senses absorbed the last moments, last cries and final silence of Belzec's cargo. This final silence shrouded the camp and not only was it intuited as part of Belzec's universe, but it also became a part of Reder's apprehension of his own experience. Daily, he became aware of his own conversion into the elements of death, cargo and corpse through incremental stages within the camp. He not only identified with the corpses he dragged to the pits but also saw no difference between these corpses and the cargo he witnessed arriving on the platform. The world of the camp around him had replaced the 'manifold of life', the structure of intuition, with a 'manifold' of death and dying through which he had to constitute himself as a subject.<sup>13</sup>

In October 1942 Himmler ordered Belzec's bodies exhumed from the ditches and burned on outdoor grates. He came to that conclusion after watching Reder's detail load 'cargo' into pits already glutted with corpses. Citing the risk of contagion, he determined that it was more efficient to burn the bodies and return the ashes to the pits, thereby increasing the pits' capacity. It was simply the destruction of unwanted 'cargo', garbage that had to be destroyed so that the risk of contagion did not continue.<sup>14</sup> For Reder, the transformation was now complete: he would be converted to ashes like all the other Jews around him. They were collectively a community of ashes. He traced his subjectivity, then, through cargo, corpse, ash. In this way, he became a subject within the ashes of his people.

In November 1942, one month later, and a month before the Nazis determined that Belzec was soon to complete its task, Reder escaped from Belzec.<sup>15</sup> By December 1942 Belzec had finished its mission of ridding the immediate regions of Jews. In early April 1943 transports of Jews were now diverted to Sobibor and Treblinka, more efficient death camps. Over the course of the year, as the Nazis dismantled Belzec, they transformed it into a farm, with one of the camp's Ukrainian guards living there, dressed as a farmer. By October 1943 the Nazis abandoned Belzec, leaving behind the image of a colony, a narrative of colonial settlement, occupied by a Ukrainian farmer; all traces of extermination had been erased by the image of the colonial settlement.<sup>16</sup>

In 1941 Esther Raab remembered that her family was forced into a ghetto and by 1942 their area of Poland was to be made '*Judenrein*', a process that led to her deportation to Sobibor.<sup>17</sup> The camp had been in operation for approximately ten months when Raab arrived on 22 December 1942. She thought it resembled a 'farm', nestled in a pine forest.<sup>18</sup> To the Jews arriving in transports, and looking solely at the crops and buildings, the camp appeared as a colony. She was one of the few women who survived the Reinhard death camps generally, and one of the few survivors of Sobibor in particular.

## Kitty S. Millet

Due to the intervention of a childhood friend, Raab was placed in a small group of women who could 'knit'.<sup>19</sup> As SS officer, Gustav Wagner, led her away with a handful of women for the detail, she was overcome by 'the smell' of bodies and 'a fire' appeared to cover this 'colony'.<sup>20</sup> Her arrival had coincided with Himmler's order at Belzec for all the Reinhard camps to excavate their corpses and burn them with the gas chambers' newest cargo, converting pits of bodies into a sea of ashes.<sup>21</sup> The boundary between chamber, pit and ash had ceased to exist. However, at this moment Raab's senses registered only the 'colony's' continuous burning of bodies, the sight of fire seeming to 'cover' the camp.

Three months later, in March 1943, Raab recalled that 'Himmler came to visit the camp; and at that time they brought 400 young girls from Majdanek, to show him how efficient and good they are at killing'.<sup>22</sup> Sobibor's officers wanted to demonstrate to Himmler the efficiency of their new gas chambers and crematoria. Their exhibition of efficiency coincided with guards and officers learning during this visit that Belzec had been dismantled and Treblinka was to be dismantled soon. Both camps were being rewarded for their competence in exterminating Jews; upon completion of their tasks, both camps would be transformed to look like 'colonies', to fit seamlessly into a narrative of normalisation: the Nazis had embarked on colonising only new territories, just like any of Europe's empires had done in centuries past.<sup>23</sup>

The knowledge of Belzec's liquidation was not shared with the Jews within Sobibor. They learned about Belzec's dismantling after they had been confined to their own barracks in Sobibor without explanation.

One day they locked us in, and we knew if they lock us in something is going on out of the ordinary . . . And they brought the inmates from Belzec, and we knew the next day that those were the inmates, and they killed them off in Sobibór. And they closed up Belzec . . . the next day when we sorted out their clothing, we found notes in their clothing.<sup>24</sup>

To be clear, they realised the closure and dismantling of Belzec in two ways: first, they were confined to their barracks so as not to see both the arrival of the train carrying Belzec's *Sonderkommando* to Sobibor, and the immediate killing of that *Sonderkommando*.<sup>25</sup> This confinement led them to infer that the murders taking place were extraordinary in comparison to the murders that they witnessed daily. Second, they understood what had happened because the last victims of Belzec had left them notes stuffed in the pockets of their clothing. The victims knew that Sobibor's sorting details, just like the sorting details at Belzec, would be charged with stripping the bodies of clothes that could be sent back to the Reich. As a last act, they counted on Raab's detail discovering the notes.<sup>26</sup> These notes begged their unknown readers, the sorting detail, to 'please revenge us'.<sup>27</sup>

The process was repeated with the dissolution of Treblinka.<sup>28</sup> When the last members of the *Sonderkommando* from Treblinka arrived at Sobibor, inmates were again confined to their barracks, but this time, due to the small cohort of Nazis and Ukrainians administering Sobibor, the Nazis shot each of Treblinka's *Sonderkommandos* individually, rather than gas them collectively. Raab heard their

cries and the shots from the knitting barracks.<sup>29</sup> Later, when she sorted the clothing of this transport in her barracks, she found notes from these victims too. Raab gained her knowledge of what had happened to the *Sonderkommando* by hearing their cries, the shots and discovering their notes. Mentally, the testimony of her senses – these three experiences – was linked to the continuous smell of burning bodies that permeated the camp. Her senses absorbed these murders bluntly and silently.

As she recounted her experience to an interviewer with the Video History Archive (VHA/Shoah Foundation at USC) she was prodded to continue with the events leading up to the Sobibor Uprising, and its relationship to her eventual court testimony against Karl Frenzel, the commandant of Camp 1. She returned instead to an event that haunted her. The Jewish victims from the transports had to walk through Sobibor's sorting barracks down a middle aisle, where they left their belongings in a pile, in front of the women of the sorting detail. The detail was not permitted to tell the victims anything about what was to happen. They stood mute, knowing that the women would walk into a gas chamber after they left the barracks.<sup>30</sup> This action required the detail to be conscious both of their unwilling complicity in the murder of the women, signified by silence, and of their eventual transformation into a similar line of victims. They were subjects waiting to join the other victims in ashes. For Raab, her recognition that her eventual end was in the ash pits of Sobibor inscribed a boundary around her. She occupied a transitional space, the position of the mute witness who was, like the women standing before her in the sorting barracks, on her way toward the gas chamber, and to Sobibor's ashes. She traced this boundary as exclusively a Jewish space.

During her recollection of the event Raab associated muteness, her silence, with her later testimony against Frenzel. She stressed that the narrative about Frenzel's brutality had to be joined to her underlying obligation to speak at his trial for all of the death camp's victims. Thus her testimony was not only to indict him, but also to restore to her the sense of speech, something that had been stripped of her at Sobibor. She linked the imposed silence then to an obligation to speak at Frenzel's trial. She was a subject when she spoke. In other words, speech became a necessary predicate because she had been prevented from speaking before. It was the only remedy to her memory of forced silence. The sense that was taken away could be restored only through her return in memory to that defining moment when she was reduced to silent object in proximity to the line of women being led into the gas chamber. In this way, the restoration of her senses produced for her the site of the subject in liberation.

She concluded her interview with the observation that, nearly fifty years later, she still did not sleep, 'it's not one night that I go to sleep and all of Sobibór doesn't march before me.'<sup>31</sup> For the survivors of Sobibor, as at Belzec, they experienced intuitively a collective muteness in which all of their senses aggregated around the key signifier of this silence, the ash pits. The only remedy was the individual's decision to testify belatedly against the perpetrators after the war, akin to a judgment to be a subject in liberation. Raab had felt surrounded not only by her own silence, but also by the muteness of the ashes, the line between these two silences erased in her

## Kitty S. Millet

memory. The women being led past her to the gas chambers, the cries and shots of the murdered *Sonderkommandos*, outside her barracks, all of these victims ended in ashes. She was only one step removed from a similar end. Thus her testimony against Frenzel signalled an intuited obligation both for those women and for herself in which her voice broke the silence fundamentally of the collective identity imposed on and associated with this memory, the silent 'march' of Sobibor's victims. Her voice was an apodeictic act against dissolution and it inscribed itself as a necessary element to her recovery as a subject in liberation.

One of the leaders of the Treblinka Uprising, Jacob Wiernik (1944), wanted the readers of his narrative, *One Year at Treblinka*, to know the lasting effects that the death camp had had on him. He measured these effects also in terms of losing his senses and his relationship to a people. He was a 'homeless old man,' who continued to live in order to tell the story of Treblinka.<sup>32</sup> He had no family, no community and no place, but he remained committed to telling his experiences, compelled to writing them, to circulating them, even though no representation or image conveyed what was etched on his memory and absorbed by his senses. He considered 'being able to tell' to motivate his existence. For him, the subject in liberation was obligated to speak, to repeat the experiences of the Jewish victims in ashes.

In a revision of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, being able to testify became the basis for Wiernik's continued existence, his statement that he was a subject in liberation from Treblinka. Freedom from Treblinka – his liberation – did not erase his need to testify. The eventual publication of his narrative also did not relieve him of the need to keep telling. In fact, the singular production of his written narrative only intensified the need to keep speaking about his experiences. It bound him to repeat the memories: it was neither remedy nor relief, but the fulfilment of an obligation.

On 23 August 1942, one month after the first deportees had been sent to Treblinka, Wiernik was picked up with other Jews for 'selection' in Warsaw. It was almost a year before the deportations to Treblinka stopped and the order to dismantle the camp was given.<sup>33</sup> He was a carpenter with his own business, approximately fifty-three years old. His transport consisted of about five hundred men, women and children.

When their transport arrived in Treblinka the Jewish deportees saw 'the camp yard . . . littered with corpses, some still in their clothes, and some naked. Their faces distorted with fright and awe, black and swollen, the eyes wide open, with protruding tongues, skulls crushed, bodies mangled. And blood everywhere, the blood of our children, of our brothers and sisters, our fathers and mothers.'<sup>34</sup> The transport's arrival coincided with the failure of Treblinka's three gas chambers. Commandant Irmgard Eberl's 'ambition' to exceed the other Reinhard camps in the number of destroyed cargo had led him to attempt to process over 300,000 'pieces' of cargo through the three chambers.<sup>35</sup> When the chambers failed, the deportees were shot where they stood. Thus the 'camp yard' was 'littered with corpses, some still in their clothes, and some naked'.

The sight of these corpses in proximity to the transport prompted the newly arrived Jews to recognise a kinship between the corpses and themselves. Like Reder

at Belzec, they understood intuitively at that moment the Nazis' intentions. While they had been told in Warsaw that Jews were under an 'eviction' order, to be deported to the East, to live in a colony distant from the *Volk*, barely two days later, at Treblinka, they realised that 'eviction' meant their death. They were to be a colony of corpses. Wiernik found a brief respite from the path to extermination because he too was forced to dig ditches, 'homes' for the new arrivals, like Reder at Belzec.

Wiernik also remembered the Nazis' revelry at the edge of these pits as he and the other Jewish workers shovelled ashes. The Nazi officers drank and banqueted there, toasting themselves and their accomplishments. Like their counterparts at Belzec, they also praised the amount of 'cargo' they had destroyed.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Wiernik saw it as a constitutive moment when his tormentors articulated their entire being as Nazi. In other words, he understood the Nazis' behaviour as a defining moment in their experiences as collective and singular subjects. They became particularly Nazi subjects because of this experience. Although Wiernik escaped from Treblinka, after the war, he remained a 'homeless old man' whose mind, like Raab's, was filled with the voices of that 'cargo', their screams from within the gas chambers and their silence as ashes filled the camp's pits. He imagined himself and his people as subjects in ashes even after his liberation. With them, he was bound to the ashes.

Shlomo Venezia was sent to Auschwitz on 11 April 1944.<sup>37</sup> Assigned to the *Sonderkommando*, Venezia cut the hair of the female corpses, eventually being assigned to the crematoria and the cleaning of the gas chambers after a transport's liquidation.<sup>38</sup> He had 'knowledge of the entire process of extermination. He bore this knowledge with the realisation that it marked him for death. He had his place on the *Sonderkommando* because his predecessor had been recently exterminated.'<sup>39</sup>

Venezia characterised his memories as 'visions of the gas chamber' in which 'eyes hung out of their sockets'.<sup>40</sup> Bodies appeared to bleed 'from everywhere, soiled by their own excrement, or that of other people'. Although he 'could not distinguish between the smell of excrement and the gas used to kill' the Jews, Venezia did remember that each victim 'reacted differently'. Each victim had died uniquely; even in death, none of them was reducible to the homogeneous ashes the Nazis had designated them to be.

Juxtaposed to these 'visions', Venezia characterised the crematoria as a 'continuous, uninterrupted process'.<sup>41</sup> On one occasion, though, the bricks in the crematoria failed, causing the crematoria to stop. Consequently, the bodies from the gas chambers remained in the 'atrium' adjacent to the crematoria for two days, where they decomposed 'in the heat'. As Venezia's *Sonderkommando* attempted to move the bodies to the crematoria, the 'gassed bodies disintegrated', 'the skin came off in pieces', 'sticking to his hands'.<sup>42</sup> The 'stench stuck' to his hands. After burning the bodies in the crematoria, the *Sonderkommando* shovelled out the ashes, carried them to the river and dumped them there. Although there was to be no trace of the Nazis' victims, he absorbed these victims through his senses. They saturated him.

For Venezia, his 'hands' evoked metonymically the way the ashes had imprinted his body, his senses and his mind. He stressed that the Jews in Birkenau believed they were 'outside the world', 'worldless', 'already in hell'.<sup>43</sup> The effects of this camp



## Kitty S. Millet

had turned them 'into robots', affectless, 'trying not to think' in order to live 'a few hours longer' under the special 'logic' of Auschwitz.<sup>44</sup> They had to remain silent, obedient, and, as Venezia turned to his interviewer, he declared, 'That's why I want to tell the story, tell it for as long as I live, but relying only on my memories, on what I am certain that I saw and nothing else.'<sup>45</sup> To be a subject in liberation meant that he had also to be a subject in ashes, with his people, the many Jewish victims whose individualities were to be erased in a sea of indeterminate ash.

In these four examples, all four individuals survived in proximity to the gas chambers, the crematoria and the ashes. They were aware that the Nazis had ultimately designated them for the ash pits because they had sense perceptions of each stage of the extermination process. As such, they were compelled to be mute witnesses to a shared death. However, their subjectivities did not necessarily shut down, even though the Nazis intended them to be reducible to silent ash. Reder sketched the outlines of the Nazi subject and believed that the Nazis' actions at Belzec, their social project of transforming Jews to ashes, had produced a collective subject position in which all participants – all persecutors – were complicit, a position grounded in the silence of ashes. By repeating his story, Reder felt that not only was he exercising an obligation to the victims but that, in the telling, he was also renewing his senses, re-authorising them. The repetition of the narrative was a constitutive act enabling him to return to life outside the camp. It was also an act fundamentally to resist the Nazi ethos of subjects who exterminate.

Raab outlined that as Jews were absorbed into Sobibor, the few assigned to the *Sonderkommando* and sorting detail were coerced into silence, and that silence was the defining characteristic of their being in the camp. It moved them incrementally closer to the silence of the ashes. Thus her ability to testify against Frenzel in court, to speak about her experiences, became a constitutive act for removing herself from the camp's designation of potential ash.<sup>46</sup> Although she still lived with the voices and memories of the women whom she could not warn in Sobibor, her testimony presented a representational space for her outside the camp where she could inhabit her memories without succumbing to the collective destruction the Nazis had assigned to her.

After his escape from Treblinka, Wiernik linked the collective position the Nazis had defined for themselves, their discharge of the Jews into ashes, to the effects of this experience for him in the future. He was a 'homeless old man' walking the streets, who, like Raab, had to speak because the speech act itself broke the camp mentality that threatened him at every moment, even after he was outside the camp and liberated. Wiernik realised that part of the Nazis' plans for Jews mandated a psychological component in conjunction with physiological destruction. Within the camp every mechanism of Nazi control converted individuals into an unspecific mass that ended in ashes. Psychologically, it meant that each Jewish subject receded into silence and isolation, until a final atomistic end. For Wiernik, being a subject in liberation obligated him to speak, to tell everyone about these subjects in ashes. His repetition of the narrative itself was intuited as an act of resistance, a sacred act of memory, a *mitzvah* he had to perform.

With these four narrators, narrative presents itself as a necessary mode of existence, and not only for the sake of evidence but also to return a sense of existential belonging to the narrator. The restoration of the voice appears contingent on the emergence of a narrative that must be told, akin to an obligation that must be fulfilled. In these four examples, becoming ash can be resisted only by the constitutive act of the subject fulfilling this remembered obligation. However, even in the restoration of the senses as a ground for the constitution of the subject, the two positions, the subject in ashes and the subject of liberation, remained in opposition to each other. They were not integrated because of liberation, and, as Wiernik's narrative demonstrates, some survivors were incapable of extricating themselves from the subject position of ashes without feeling that their liberation from the pit, the chamber, was in itself a violation of their families and communities. They existed to remember them.

This observation motivated the philosopher and novelist H. G. Adler, also a survivor, to make ashes a critical component at the end of his novel, *Eine Reise (The Journey)*. Ostensibly it is about the Lustig family's deportation to an unnamed camp; by the novel's end, the sole survivor of the Lustig family, Paul, has been reduced to an anonymous entity, a monad beneath a sea of ashes that hears disembodied voices, snippets of his family's memories, hovering overhead. Finding a foothold within the ashes, the detritus of belongings and bone that do not reduce to ash, he pulls himself out onto a nameless path populated with hordes of 'Anybodys' wandering aimlessly outside the camps, but the ashes still cling to him. This crowd demands that if he is to re-enter human existence he must do so by forfeiting memory, identity, specificity. The testimony of his senses must be suppressed in order to live among those outside the camps.

However, with the knowledge that his senses have absorbed the disembodied memories of the sea of ashes, that his body is imprinted with specific loss, the entity emerging from the ashes identifies his memories as a constitutive element of his being. This realisation produces a constant resistance to joining the 'Anybodys' on the path to liberation. Becoming a subject again means that he cannot be interchangeable or commensurate with those who lived and suffered because of the war. To understand the implications of this resistance, Adler focuses on how Paul reconstitutes the subject in liberation.

Nameless, the entity climbing out from the ashes no longer distinguishes his body parts from the ruins of the world outside the camp. His persecutors have erased the boundary between animate and inanimate in their world of death, a manifold of dying. To this nameless monad, everything is inanimate, interchangeable, including the self, but the monad is aware of a nascent desire to find the self and to produce a community, even in its absence.

When the entity realises that the beings around him are interchangeable 'Anybodys', and that interchangeability is the condition for his existence with them, he recoils because he wants to be Paul again. In other words, Adler uses fiction to demonstrate how to restore a name, to revive a family, a people, to find a place for the memories that adhere to him. For Adler, this realisation signifies a basic need for the

## Kitty S. Millet

survivors of the death camps: there has to be a way for them to live with their memories, either in the space of testimony or in the space of narrative, in order to for them to continue both as subjects of ashes and as subjects of liberation. These narrative processes are necessary and constitutive because they enable subjects to live/exist in their singularity, in liberation. For Adler, literature represented a critical condition for the Holocaust survivor subject: literature enabled the reader to think through with the survivor the necessary act of their testimony, to absorb and to share the obligation of their memory.

Essentially, what I'm getting at here is that the subject in ashes remains a constitutive part of the survivor or subject in liberation. It is a subject position that finds its remedy not in the physical experience of liberation but, rather, in the renewed capacity to speak as an obligation for the Nazis' victims, the reawakening of the senses. The subject in liberation remains, then, tied to the subject of ashes out of necessity. They are not in opposition to each other but, rather, bound intimately together: the subject in liberation is obligated to remember the subjects within these ashes. As Adler and Orenstein underscore, with literature, fiction and memoir we join them – we become obligated – in renewing these conditions for their restoration.

## Notes

- 1 See A. Orenstein, *My Mother's Eyes: Holocaust Memories of a Young Girl* (Indianapolis, IN, Emmis Books, 2004), p. 61.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Orenstein, *My Mother's Eyes*, pp. 61–3.
- 4 Orenstein, unpublished interview conducted by author, 20 March 2016.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Technically, Reder was one of two survivors of Belzec; the other was Chaim Hirschmann (Hirszmann), who escaped from the train carrying the last survivors of Belzec's *Sonderkommando* to Sobibor, where the Nazis intended to kill them, with one other member. Hiding in the forests, he joined a partisan band fighting Nazis. Directly after giving his testimony to the Jewish Historical District Commission, Hirschmann was murdered by men from the National Armed Forces (NSZ) who were waiting for him outside the building. His testimony was never released publicly. For a fuller description, see C. Webb, *The Belzec Death Camp, History, Biographies, Remembrance* (Stuttgart, Ibidem Verlag, 2016), pp. 94–5. See also M. Marrus, *The Nazi Holocaust: The Victims of the Holocaust*, 2 vols (Westport, CT, Meckler, 1989), p. 1105.
- 7 Parts of my analysis of Reder appear in K. Millet, *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization, and the Holocaust, a Comparative History of Persecution* (London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2017).
- 8 R. Reder, *Belzec* (Krakow, Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna, 1946 and 1999).
- 9 Ibid, p. 5.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid, p. 12.

- 12 See K. Millet, 'Contemplating Jean Améry's Loss of Transcendence', in M. Zolkos (ed.), *On Jean Améry: Philosophy of the Catastrophe* (Lanham, MD, Lexington Press, 2012), pp. 21–38.
- 13 A philosophical term, the 'manifold of life' is supposed to be the posited potential substance of all living beings. It is a necessarily diverse field because of that potentiality. For Kant, the philosopher associated with the term, each subject 'presses out' identity from that manifold so that diversity and difference is a condition of life. For a fuller analysis of the transformation of the Kantian Manifold of Life in the death camp's Manifold of Death, and dying in relation to the implications that would have for decades in the survivor's life, see Millet, 'Contemplating Jean Améry's Loss of Transcendence'.
- 14 H. G. Adler alluded to Himmler's conclusion in his novel, *Eine Reise: Roman* (Berlin, Germany, Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002). In that text, the head of the Lustig family, Dr Lustig, presumes on the deportation that his skills as a leading medical professional in Germany will translate into value at their new 'home.' However, upon his arrival and announcement proudly that he is a doctor and can tend to the ill, the guards mock him and instead assign him to 'garbage collection,' a job that makes no distinction between the detritus of everyday life and the bodies of the Nazis' victims. When he dies on the job, his body is thrown in with the rest of the day's collections.
- 15 With his escape, he became, along with Chaim Hirschmann (Hirschmann), one of the only two survivors of the Belzec death camp who could give accounts of what had happened at the camp. As noted in note 6, for a fuller description, see Webb, *The Belzec Death Camp*, pp. 94–5. See also M. Marrus, *The Nazi Holocaust*, p. 1105.
- 16 This was part of Hitler's cynical plan and propaganda campaign: to proclaim to the world that the Nazis engaged in colonial occupation, to set up the image of the colony as the Nazis' real mission. 'Going East' was only the social project of settling Jews far from the Reich's populations so that they could no longer harm German citizens. Apparently, the lack of Jews alive in these 'colonies' did not seem to trouble the buyers of Nazi propaganda.
- 17 Visual History Archives (VHA), E. Raab (1990), RG-50.030.0184.tr.s.en, pp. 5–6, unpublished.
- 18 Quoted in Y. Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2018; 1987), p. 36. Arad cites Yad Vashem Archive (YVA) A-361, p. 4, 'testimony of Dov Freiberg'.
- 19 See VHA, E. Raab (1990), RG-50.030.0184.tr.s.en, p. 9. See also Millet, *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization, and the Holocaust*, p. 142.
- 20 The initial smell of the crematoria was noted by several survivors of the camps. See Orenstein, *My Mother's Eyes*.
- 21 VHA, E. Raab (1990), RG-50.030.0184.tr.s.en, *ibid.* This was also the image that H. G. Adler used to organise the end of his novel, *Eine Reise*, mentioned previously in connection with Reder's narrative. In Adler's novel the only survivor of the Lustig family is the youngest child, Paul. When Paul escapes the unknown camp or 'ark,' as the inmates call it, he does so by climbing out of a 'sea of ashes.' As he

- struggles to pull himself out of the ashes, he uses footholds made from the detritus of bone and belongings that didn't burn to ash. In other words, the 'sea of ashes' was not a poetic trope, but an actual reality that permeated the senses of the individual survivor.
- 22 VHA, E. Raab (1990), RG-50.030.0184.tr.s.en, p. 12.
  - 23 The Nazis sought to promote a narrative in which the 'colonies' or camps were designed as sites for the emergence of new German colonial subjects; their purpose was agriculture, not extermination. Jewish victimisation was a secondary effect.
  - 24 VHA, E. Raab (1990), RG-50.030.0184.tr.s.en, p. 12.
  - 25 This train was the same one from which Chaim Hirschmann escaped.
  - 26 Implicitly, the victims knew that the notes stuffed in pockets would be their last communication, their last acts of defiance, in that they would reveal their murders.
  - 27 VHA, RG-50.030.0184.tr.s.en, p. 13.
  - 28 Ibid.
  - 29 Ibid.
  - 30 Ibid, p. 14.
  - 31 Ibid, p. 20.
  - 32 J. Wiernik, *A Year in Treblinka. An Inmate Who Escaped Tells the Torturous Facts* (New York, American Representation of the General Jewish Workers' Union of Poland, 1944), p. 1.
  - 33 Ibid, chapter 2. Selections collected Jews from neighborhoods, and cities, for deportation.
  - 34 See *ibid*, chapter 2, last page.
  - 35 The scene Wiernik describes is further explained by Yitzak Arad. See Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, p. 124. Arad quotes 'SS Unterscharführer August Hingst, who served at that time in Treblinka, testified that "Dr. Eberl's ambition was to reach the highest possible numbers and exceed all the other camps. So many transports arrived that the disembarkation and gassing of the people could no longer be handled (nicht mehr bewältigt werden konnte)." From the technical and organizational standpoint, the camp was simply unable to absorb such a large number of victims.'
  - 36 Wiernik's recollection, like Reder's, echoed the Nazis' own sentiments about the necessity of destroying Jews as a condition for truly realising Nazi/Aryan being. It was not a progressive evolution of Nazi thinking over time, but a cornerstone, a constitutive component, of the Nazi aesthetic from its inception. Even before the Wannsee Conference in 1942, Hans Frank, the governor general of the General Government, extolled the prospect of Jewish extermination finally being articulated in his territory, coded through the signifiers of exile and colonisation, in 1941: 'A major migration is about to start. But what is to happen to the Jews? Do you think they will actually be resettled in Ostland villages? We were told in Berlin. Why all this trouble? We can't use them either. Liquidate them yourselves' (quoted in Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, p. 12). Frank already knew that Jewish 'migration', Jews' 'resettlement', was a code for their extermination. The narrative of Jews 'going to the East to be resettled' circulated throughout the Reich in order to create an excuse for Germans regarding Jews' disappearance from cities,

- and to reassure Jews that they were to be resettled away from Germans. For Jews, it exploited the familiarity of Jewish exile. However, as Frank's comments clarified, the Nazis never 'intended' to 'resettle' Jews. This was never diaspora; 'resettlement' was always a signifier for extermination. Likewise, Odilo Globočnik, the Nazi police commissioner of the Lublin district and overseer of the Reinhard camps, saw in the Nazis' actions an affirmation of the Nazis' true being. This was illustrated in his delay in adhering to Himmler's order to burn the corpses at the Reinhard camps. As he recounted to Kurt Gerstein, one of the Hygiene Department's SS consultants, at the pits outside the crematoria, 'Gentlemen, if there were ever, after us, a generation so cowardly and so soft that they could not understand our work which is so good, so necessary, then, gentlemen, all of National Socialism will have been in vain. We ought, on the contrary, to bury bronze tablets stating that it was we who had the courage to carry out this gigantic task!' (Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, p. 101). Proud of his 'accomplishments', Globočnik considered any judgement against the extermination of the Jews as a sign of cowardice, effeminacy and weakness. He wanted 'bronze tablets' to be buried with the corpses, commemorating the Germans 'courage in building gas chambers and murdering Jews. Such tablets would ensure that the Nazis' efforts were to be remembered as a 'necessary' task. For a complete discussion of the Globocnik account, see Millet, *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization, and the Holocaust*, p. 129.
- 37 S. Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz* (London and Washington, DC, Polity Books in association with the USHMM, 2009), pp. 1–16.
- 38 Ibid., p. 60.
- 39 Millet, *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization and the Holocaust*, p. 150.
- 40 Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, p. 60.
- 41 Ibid, p. 73.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid, p. 61.
- 44 Ibid, p. 59.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.