

REPORT

The Holocaust Personality

By Jan Burzlaff, PhD Candidate, Modern European History, Harvard University, Dori Laub Fellow 2021/2022

As the William A. Ackman Fellow for Holocaust Studies at Harvard University, I am currently completing my dissertation, a comparative and transnational history of Jews' survival during the Holocaust (1939-1945). Engaging in an active dialogue with political science, the cognitive sciences, anthropology, and psychology, my dissertation rethinks the history of ordinary Jews across Nazi-occupied Europe through the idea of surviving, a social process that involved spontaneous choices, painful decisions, and day-to-day experiences. A close study of more than 2,000 wartime diaries, postwar memoirs, and video testimonies in 10 languages and from 15 archives explores Jews' intimate experiences in Western Europe (Copenhagen, Marseille, Brussels, and Amsterdam) and Eastern Europe (Lviv, Kyiv, Kraków, and Vilna) between 1939 and 1945.

The Fortunoff Video Archive plays a central role in my study, as its video testimonies are firmly centered on individual experiences. Thanks to the Dori Laub Fellowship, I am devoting one chapter of my dissertation to a crucial but understudied question: How did violence change those persecuted, and how did it change their perceptions of themselves while trying to survive? Indeed, in many of the archive's video testimonies, both for Western and Eastern Europe, one finds innumerable mentions of a fundamental change – an altered personality and character. In her interview in 1986, Dobka W. from Vilnius/Vilna noted that one of her strongest memories of the Holocaust was the moment when she was deported to a labor camp in Riga. There, “they took away my personality.” Irene M., born in Janów in 1924, describes that “to take cover, I needed a new name – something approved so that they would think I was a different person. (...) The only other solution would have been to go to the Gestapo and say, “Here I am, you can kill me.” Even those who ultimately perished and did not buy false papers underwent such changes. Rose Z.'s testimony illustrates this well. “They picked out Mr. Iber Schutz, a strictly Orthodox man who would only talk to people through his wife. Two nice-looking German soldiers took long tailor scissors and cut his beard. They cut piece by piece, diagonally, leaving one side long. He stood there like a stoic, constantly saying some prayers. Since then, I remember Mr. Iber Schutz. He wore a black triangle tied around his beard. He was not the same man anymore.”

What does violence do to us? The Holocaust offers strong arguments for a systematic case study. A lack of insight into this overall psychological transformation and its myriad local manifestations can be explained in part by the reluctance with which scholars approached Jewish testimonies until the late 1990s. We now know that the analytical capacity of personal accounts has long been underestimated: Christopher Browning and others have found that these testimonies, even in their details, have remained remarkably consistent over the decades. Unlike written ego documents, video testimonies illuminate particularly well the transformations of the self because they highlight the Holocaust's psychological impact. Due to their self-reflexive nature, video testimonies are best suited to capture the changes in personality that often emerge only decades after the events.

Consequently, when it comes to changes in the inner lives of the persecuted, the Dori Laub Fellowship was ideal – not only because of the rich interviews recorded by Dori Laub (1937 – 2018), Lawrence L. Langer, and many others, but because of an intrinsically interdisciplinary approach. Only a conversation with social and clinical psychology, in which Laub was trained, could shed further light on this process. Laub and others have made the case for survivors' prolonged trauma – a trauma that shattered their prewar personalities and left them with two separate selves, each supported by irreconcilable memories. And indeed, Holocaust survivors often mention a trigger moment, such as the loss of a loved one, that seems to have divided their personality – the personality that existed before the event and the war, and the one that existed afterward. There is a sense of rupture, the experience of a radical physical and emotional disorientation.

As these psychological transformations have remained largely absent from Jewish-centered histories of World War II and the Holocaust, I devoted my Dori Laub Fellowship to them. Holocaust scholars have identified many effects of the persecution on individuals and communities, such as in the camp system, without exploring the full extent of the persecution's immense impact on the emotional realm. Indeed, the Nazi genocide forcibly led targeted people, one by one, to a world where they lacked clear reference points. New ones, as tentative and fleeting as they proved for many, had to be found, both for victims and survivors. The Holocaust across Europe, I argue, forced every persecuted Jewish person to develop a new self, which I suggest calling the Holocaust personality. These transformations depended on several factors, which have to be embedded in specific contexts: the duration of one's exposure to physical violence and the question of bodily integrity; the extent to which gendered social roles – as parents, romantic partners, friends, children, and professionals – shifted during the war; the legacies of prewar regimes of selfhood, from self-conscious efforts to embrace Soviet subjectivities to the liberal, assimilationist model of the Third French Republic; one's attitudes towards Jewish communal traditions; and, finally, age. The concept of the Holocaust personality seeks to take stock of this universal, yet most personal experience during the persecution.