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Catherine Barrette, Bridget Haylock
and Danielle Mortimer

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Because Memory is also a Prison: The Holocaust and the Question of Representing Trauma in the Memoirs of Ruth Elias and Ruth Klüger

Anabela Valente Simões

Abstract

Holocaust representations performed by male survivors such as Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel became the ‘norm’ in the aftermath of WWII. Nonetheless, and despite the unquestionable canonical value, their narratives are not unique icons of the marking and traumatic experiences of that particular past. In actual fact, this historical moment became representation object for many female authors who, after overcoming a long latency period in which it was not yet possible to face trauma and work it through, finally found the strength to break the silence and tried to come to terms with the past through the process of writing. In this essay I intend to examine two distinctive autobiographical accounts written by women. On the one hand, Ruth Elias - who as a young Jewish from Czechoslovakia was taken to Auschwitz while several months pregnant - depicts with painful detail the experience of survival in the Nazi camps in her internationally acclaimed memoir *Die Hoffnung erhielt mich am Leben*. On the other hand, Austrian Jewish survivor Ruth Klüger accomplishes the following tasks in her praised novel *weiter leben*: the narration of her traumatic, haunted memories of the past and, simultaneously, an acute reflection upon past and contemporary complex issues. Herein Klüger assumes a provocative, sarcastic and defying attitude by examining sensitive matters such as disrupted parental relationships during the Jewish persecution, current complex relationships between Jews and Germans and even some Jewish patriarchal conventions which, according to the author’s perspective, seem to deny women their right to hold traumatic memories.

Key Words: Holocaust, identity, memory, trauma, female writing.

The traumatic experience of the Holocaust has long been represented mostly by male authors. In actual fact their experiences and memories became the ‘norm’ and, therefore, women’s experiences, some of which are inevitably different, have been relegated to a lower priority in contrast to the mainstream.¹ In reality and despite the fact that both men and women indeed recall the same violent and unique scenario, there are some specificities that need to be taken into account and which, naturally, are not present in the narratives of canonical authors such as, for example, Jean Améry, Elie Wiesel, Imre Kertész or Primo Levi – who, in his high acclaimed autobiographical account *If this is a man*, actually acknowledges he does not know what might have happened to women.² Though controversial, the thesis of the distinctiveness of women’s perspective is supported, among others, by one

of the most important exponents of the Holocaust Studies, the historian Raul Hilberg, who considered that 'the road to annihilation was marked by events that affected men as man and women as woman.'³

Female writing unveiled, on the one hand, the double discrimination women suffered from - they were Jews, victims of a totalitarian and racist regime and, simultaneously, they were women in a patriarchal and misogynous society. On the other hand, these narratives include material about experiences that are unique to women, such as the vulnerability to rape, pregnancy and childbirth, amenorrhea and its psychological effects, experiences of nakedness and loss of femininity. Their accounts frequently also focus on women's socialisation strategies (friendship, bonding and mutual support within the group in opposition to the lone wolf behaviour of men) as a means to live through their ordeal.

Particularly from the late 1980s onwards, a tendency to represent the past from a female perspective has finally emerged. The fact that only later in life some women have voiced their experience may be related to the fact that many survivors have endured their traumatic memories with muted pain, thus postponing a necessary work of mourning. Silence did not mean that the trauma was overcome though; it meant more likely that past experiences were so overwhelming that it was not (yet) possible to confront them, to give voice to decades of haunting memories and thoughts, that is, to work them through. The number of autobiographic accounts that record those past experiences - frequently dedicated to the grandchildren and often regretting how the second generation was kept out of these memories - demonstrates that the shield of silence had been finally broken.

From various accounts about the Holocaust experience, I chose to present here two narratives which address the Shoah in a different fashion and distinctive level of complexity: *Die Hoffnung erhielt mich am Leben* and *weiter leben*, written by Ruth Elias and Ruth Klüger, respectively.

Ruth Elias was a young Jewish woman from Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, when she was sent to Theresienstadt and then to Auschwitz.⁴ In her book *Die Hoffnung erhielt mich am Leben* - translated into English in 1998 under the title *Triumph of Hope* - Elias narrates her childhood memories, the horrors she has endured in the Nazi camps, the aftermath of imprisonment and the difficult adjustment to normal life in Israel.⁵ Elias recalls how she survived a tremendously traumatic experience and how she survived the survival itself, for example, how she coped with the remaining wounds, with the trauma, throughout the years. It took Elias more than four decades to write down her memories, which commence as follows:

Time is passing quickly for me these days. I tend to look ahead, for the years have taught me not to look back. But from time to time I do – and then the immediate and pervasive sensation I have is of the concentration camp. It haunts me and has left deep scars. I cannot rid myself of it, even though I have tried all my

life to push it aside. It keeps coming back, so I am condemned to live with it. I can't describe the sensation to anyone who has not gone through this kind of hell; after all, nobody can comprehend the incomprehensible.⁶

Elias' autobiography should be read as a representative document of Holocaust testimony. Its language is direct and simple. The tone is clear, exact, with no great aesthetical and literary ambitions. It rather aims at reporting with detail and denouncing the facts, leaving philosophical reflections or metaphoric and symbolic constructions aside. Herein the reader finds numerous descriptions of the difficult day-to-day life such as, for example, inhuman and humiliating situations or the unhygienic conditions of the camps.⁷ Specific female perspective is particularly depicted in this account. Elias describes the violence of women's 'medical' examinations (whose real objective was to find out if inmates had hidden valuables in her bodies), experiences of nakedness, prostitution and rape, forced abortions and also medical experiments with newborns.⁸ In fact Ruth Elias was pregnant when she was put in a cattle-wagon and sent to Auschwitz. Eventually she gave birth with the help of a Polish mid-wife, without water or towels. Elias was then chosen to participate in an 'experiment' conducted by the physician Josef Mengele, and in the end she lost her baby.⁹ In the camp she met Kurt Elias, who would become her husband. After the war she returned to Prague in an attempt to find members of her family; upon finding that none of her immediate relatives had survived, she became seriously depressed and was institutionalised. Aware of the darkening political situation in Czechoslovakia under the Soviets, and the continuing anti-Semitism, Ruth and Kurt Elias decided to emigrate to Israel and restart their lives there.

Jewish author Ruth Klüger was born in Vienna in 1931. After liberation she emigrated to the United States, where she became a Professor of German Literature at the University of California. Klüger decided to write her memories in Germany when, in 1988, she was involved in an accident. This incident, which in her subconscious made her feel again victim of German aggression, led to a confrontation with the trauma left by the concentration camp experience, the loss of family members and the process of surviving her own traumatic memories.

Weiter leben - to live on - was published in 1992. The book was received with acclaim in the German literary world, won prestigious literary prizes and was recognised as one of the most important works on the subject. Due to its great success the book was translated and published in several different countries. Nonetheless an English translation was not available. And this was an expressed wish of the author herself, who admitted in an interview that she indeed planned an English version, but not before the death of her mother, who was not pleased with her own description in *weiter leben*.¹⁰

The narrative commences with a poignant statement: 'Their secret was death, not sex.' This short line reveals eight-year-old Klüger's interest in overhearing the adults' conversations about 'forbidden' topics such as torture, pain and death. Satirically Klüger replaces one's notion of inappropriate subjects for children - 'sex' - with the new, circumstantially more important one: 'death.' This opening is particularly significant because Klüger establishes the tone for the rest of the text: unconventional, provocative and irreverent approach. Klüger's attitude to her past is indeed different from other accounts: whereas other survivors - Elias, for example - choose to recall the details of their experience, she looks at larger issues behind the concentration camps and the post-war period.

In *weiter leben* Klüger wrote down her Auschwitz memories, her thoughts, fears, feelings of guilt and also her rage, in German and for Germans as she unequivocally declares in her book. *weiter leben* also 'challenges the notion that the Nazi legacy concerns only the German mainstream. Klüger's work illustrates that Jews too need to come to terms with their past, with the Holocaust, with Germany, and with the Germans.'¹¹ On the whole, *weiter leben* intends, on the one hand, to challenge Germans to assume responsibility for their past and, on the other hand, it speaks to Jews, who are advised to follow in the author's footsteps in reflecting on, mourning, and integrating the difficulties of their traumatic past.

Klüger's reflections are often revealing of a sense of displacement. Despite being born in Vienna, there seems to be no identification with her Austrian nationality. According to Klüger's point of view, Vienna represents segregation and her first prison, from which she did not manage to escape.¹² In opposition to Vienna, Theresienstadt is described with a more positive tone; this is the place she somehow loved, that changed the meditative and repressed person she was in Vienna and made her a social being.¹³ In the end she considers the German language her only 'home.'¹⁴ She is also particularly critical of a set of principles imposed by patriarchal societies. Ironically she declares that her book is meant for women, as men only read books written by other men.¹⁵ She also sarcastically criticises the attitude of her ex-husband who didn't want her to narrate her wartime memories because these would compete with his own. This was also the moment she understood that every war seems to belong to men, as well as wartime memories seem too.¹⁶ Religion, which she first learned in Theresienstadt, also contributed to this critical point of view.¹⁷ Even though Klüger assumes that religion is indeed part of her identity, she refuses to accept a set of principles and stories she does not believe in and that keep women out of a series of rituals. Therefore she assumes herself as a bad Jew who soon acknowledged the restrictions of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal Jewish world.¹⁸

In her book Ruth Klüger refers to her mother as someone possessive, authoritarian and presumptuous. Their unconstructive, damaging relationship, which she named 'mother-daughter-neurosis,' has influenced Klüger in such a negative way that, according to her view, her ability to be a (good) mother had

been undoubtedly affected.¹⁹ And this is exactly the reason why it took a decade for the English version to see the light of day. As her mother was badly hurt by some passages, it would only be after her death, in 2000, that the revised English version would be published under the title *Still Alive*.²⁰ As Klüger explains, it 'is neither a translation nor a new book: it's another version, a parallel book, if you will for my children and my American students ... I have written this book twice.'²¹

This text preserves some characteristics of the first account but it introduces, as well, important changes and updates acknowledged in the meantime, such as the circumstances of her father's death, who in the end did not perish in a gas chamber in Auschwitz just like she had always imagined, but was sent in a transport to Latvia and Estonia.²² It maintains its original structure, but it also excludes a considerable number of passages and chapters. The Epilogue is considerably different. It does not begin with the description of her accident in 1988 but, in its place, she describes what she does best, which is 'running away' and with the inherent danger of 'running in circles,'²³ meaning this, not being able to escape from her personal story, from her 'ghosts': the memory of her late father and brother. Here she recognises that her memory is also a prison, from which she never managed to escape throughout her entire life.

Another clear difference is the option for not using fictional names, which contributes to the more personal, honest and forgiving tone of *Still Alive*. Her German intellectual friend Christoph, for example, is identified as the famous German writer Martin Walser.²⁴ Of most importance is also the circumstance that while *weiter leben* was addressed to Germans and dedicated to her Göttingen friends, the addressees of *Still Alive* are her American students and in its initial dedication a homage is paid to her mother. This immediately unfolds the conciliatory tone we find in this new version where she seems to recognise that her mother's feelings of guilt towards the death of her brother indeed moulded their relationship. She also forgives - but does not forget - certain facts of the past, like for instance, not having been allowed to flee to Palestine and thus avoid deportation.²⁵

In the end, Klüger talks about her four-year old granddaughter and the feeling of triumph because her mother eventually had 'a human death, because she had survived and outlived the evil times and had died in her own good time, almost a hundred years after she [great-granddaughter] was born.'²⁶ She closes her (second) memories with a peaceful, bright picture of her mother and granddaughter seizing joyful moments. It seems that a message of reconciliation and acceptance has been sent and that it is finally possible to close the circle ... or maybe not, as this second account proved that along with the present, the past is continuously evolving, proving that memories cannot be fixed in space and time but live on.²⁷

The fact both authors needed a long time to revisit their past and compose a narrative about their experiences might be related to the fact that in the aftermath of the war survivors try to normalise their lives by repressing the horrors they have

endured and witnessed. This pseudo-normality seems to be effective, in the sense that the survivors' first priority is to take care of their own physical recovery: as it can jeopardise their own physical reconstruction, survivors just know they can neither mourn nor feel loss. Despite the seeming normality, the truth is that the psychological self-reconstruction is continuously delayed and, as a consequence, responses to the extreme circumstances of the past tend to arise, commonly in the form of repetitive and uncontrollable hallucinations or other phenomena that go beyond normal standards of behaviour. Instead of developing more constructive responses to their feelings, these individuals 'act out', i.e. they discharge conflicted mental content by means of action. In other words, these subjects have 'a tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it. They tend to relive occurrences . . . for example, in flashbacks, or in nightmares, or in words that are compulsively repeated.'²⁸ For instance, people who were deported in cattle-wagons recurrently feel claustrophobic every time they enter an elevator or a confined area, or they can also feel disturbed when any other images of the present somehow relate to the traumatic memories of the past. In *weiter leben* Ruth Klüger states that five decades after the war she still feels anxious every time she sees a wagon transporting goods and Ruth Elias recounts how she kept on returning to the source of trauma by repetitively dreaming that she was still sitting in the cattle-wagon and that her family and friends were being gassed.²⁹ Particularly symptomatic is also the description of the birth of Elias' second son already in Israel, which demonstrates the depth of the trauma left by the death of her first child in Auschwitz: when the nurse takes the baby from the delivery room, she gets disoriented, starts crying and desperately says that her child should not be taken and murdered.³⁰

In opposition to this tendency to compulsively repeat past situations, the process of 'working through' is another form of dealing with trauma. It can be understood as the act of creating a separation between past traumatic experiences and the present, in other words, 'the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish past, present and future.'³¹ On the whole, it requires the ability to accept the present independently, to some extent, of the past experiences, and reinvest in life, meaning this, to invest in new objects and allow the mourning process to be carried on.

This understanding of trauma may also be considered in the writing of memoirs. In fact, the two processes of 'acting out' and 'working through' seem to be combined in the act of capturing the trauma in memoirs, towards their final goal, which is dealing with grief and psychic pain. This means that, as the survivor writes about the experiences, this subject acts out and brings the memory into the present, while at the same time working through and using the writing to help both acknowledge and disengage from the past. As a result, the writing of memoirs serves as a tool for managing and accepting past traumatic events, which validates the assumption that 'all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a

story about them.³² By placing experiences into an organised layout of words and chapters, survivors find or construct a sense of meaning for the traumatic events they were subjected to, the past is exorcised and a sense of catharsis may be eventually attained.

Notes

¹ S. Friedländer, 'Testimony, Narrative, and Nightmare: The Experiences of Jewish Women in the Holocaust', 1995, Viewed on 06.09.2010, <http://www.theverylongview.com/WATH/essays/golden.htm>.

² P. Levi, *Se isto é um homem*, Lisboa, Editorial Teorema, 1988, p. 18.

³ R. Hilberg, *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden: Die Gesamtgeschichte des Holocaust*, Berlin, Olle & Wolter, 1982, p. 126.

⁴ Ruth Elias was born on October 6, 1922. She died in 2008.

⁵ *Die Hoffnung erhielt mich am Leben* was first published in 1988.

⁶ R. Elias, *Triumph of Hope*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1998, p. ix.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-162; pp. 147-148.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185

¹⁰ C. Karich, 'Eine starke Frau', *Sybille*, 1993, pp. 4-93, here 54.

¹¹ D. Lorrenz, *Memory and Criticism: Ruth Kluger's weiter leben*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1993, pp. 207-224, here 208.

¹² R. Klüger, *weiter leben: Eine Jugend*, München, dtv, 1999, p. 19.

¹³ Klüger, *weiter leben*, p. 103.

¹⁴ I. Heidelberg-Leonard, *Ruth Klüger. Weiter leben. Eine Jugend*, München, Oldenbourg, 1996, p. 57.

¹⁵ Klüger, *weiter leben*, p. 82.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236; 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁰ R. Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*. Feminist Press, New York: 2001, p. 210.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

²⁷ C. Schaumann, 'From 'weiter leben' (1992) to 'Still Alive' (2001): Ruth Kluger's Cultural Translation of Her 'German Book' for an American Audience', *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 3, 2004, pp. 324-339, here p. 328.

²⁸ D. LaCapra, *An Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra: Acting-out and Working-through Trauma*, Cornell University, Shoah Resource Center, 1998, pp. 2-3.

²⁹ Klüger, *weiter leben*, p. 108. Elias, *Die Hoffnung erhielt mich am Leben*, p. 254.

³⁰ Elias, *Die Hoffnung erhielt mich am Leben*, pp. 328-329.

³¹ LaCapra, *An Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra*, p. 2.

³² I. Dinesen, *Making Stories, Making Selves*, Columbus, Ohio, Ohio State University Press, 1993, p. 17.

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