

# Traumatic Performances in the Digital Age: Why We Need the Video Testimonies of Holocaust Bystanders

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*Abstract:* Focusing on the Holocaust bystanders' video testimonies, I examine how the notion of landscape in a testimonial framework might help us to grasp the main problems of testimony as a mode of relation to the past. Therefore, I outline the intertwining processes of digitalisation and conventionalisation of the genre of Holocaust video testimony and its slow migration towards the (mythical) East of Europe: how at the same time it moved outside the safe space of library or home of the witness and ceased to be by default a survivor's account. As I argue, in case of bystanders' video testimonies, their topographical position and performance of the act of seeing create a complex and intertwined phenomenon and these visual documents – construed as a form of digital transmission of the trauma of the Other – may compel us to confront the Shoah from an utterly different, more precarious standpoint.

*Keywords:* video testimony, bystander, Holocaust, landscape, trauma, index

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In her seminal study on Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), the essay 'The Return of the Voice', Shoshana Felman chooses for her argument two testimonies from the film: those of Jan Karski and of Szymon Srebnik.<sup>1</sup> The testimony of Karski – a Polish resistance fighter who visited the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1942, and later created a report on the Shoah for the Polish government-in-exile and the Allies – is static, moderated, filmed almost exclusively in medium shot and close-up. Meanwhile, the account of Srebnik – a former prisoner of the Chełmno extermination camp who miraculously survived after being shot in the back of the head – takes us outside, to the idyllic landscape surrounding the former death camp. Lanzmann filmed Srebnik against the vast backdrop of a grassy meadow, asked him

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to sing pre-war songs on a boat floating peacefully along the river Ner (just as Srebnik had been forced to do by the Nazis during the war), and, finally, showed him among residents of Chełmno, gathered next to the local church, as they repeatedly interspersed their remarks with anti-Semitic rhetoric, as if in some sinister time loop.

It is a specific affective-cognitive discrepancy inherent to this scene, but present on various levels of Srebnik's account, which attracts the critic's attention: namely 'the missed contemporaneity' between him and the Poles standing by him; between his silence and his voice; between a victim's experience and the witnesses thereof; but also between us, the viewers, and the testimony itself. 'Can we become contemporaneous with the shock, with the displacement, with the disorientation process that is triggered by such testimonial re-enactment?' – asks Felman (Felman and Laub 1992: 268). What also incites a cognitive dissonance in Srebnik's testimony is the disjointed contemporaneity of his account, contrasted with the persistence of its spatial setting – the serene landscape of Central and Eastern Europe, unchanged throughout the years. And indeed it is the spatial realm of testimony which seems to be the axis of Felman's argument: testimony is defined by her as 'an utterly unique and irreplaceable topographical *position* with respect to an occurrence' (Felman and Laub 1992: 206; original emphasis). Thus, Lanzmann's documentary provides us with 'three different performances of the act of seeing' (Felman and Laub 1992: 208): those of the victims, of the perpetrators and, finally, of the bystanders.

I would like to follow this spatial-performative thread in Felman's thinking in the approach to visual documents which present a kind of affinity with the testimonies filmed by Lanzmann in rural Poland: video testimonies of Polish bystanders recorded at different sites of killings, collected over the past two decades by two institutions – the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, and the French foundation Yahad – In Unum, based in Paris. I will analyse two pairs of such documents, in order to show how landscape, in a testimonial framework, might help us grasp the main paradoxes of testimony as a mode of relation to the past, but also to discuss the problem of the indexicality of testimony in the digital age. If testimony indeed is a 'topographical *position* with respect to an occurrence' (Felman and Laub 1992: 206), it is its specific rootedness in the site which at once underpins and undermines the impossible temporality of testimony as a manifestation of trauma. I will show, therefore, how the post-Holocaust landscape of Central and Eastern Europe presented in these documents may be interpreted both as an indexical anchor for the trauma, and as the digital spectre of the post-witness era. Finally, I would like to discuss how those situated (Walker 2012: 270) testimonies of Holocaust bystanders may serve as a tool to comprehend the complicated dynamics of the Shoah 'by bullets' (Desbois 2008) dispersed in hundreds of sites in Central and Eastern Europe, outside the main death camps. They may also enable our understanding of post-traumatic societies such as the Polish one, whose citizens witnessed *en masse* the colossal tragedy of their Jewish compatriots; societies which must now deal with the convoluted memory of these events and the many roles they played in them.

## The birth of a genre

To better understand the context of the emergence of Holocaust bystanders' video testimonies, it is worth looking at the brief history of this type of visual documents itself. During the 25 years which have passed since the publication of Felman's monograph, testimony itself has both gone digital and turned into quite a fixed genre. The development of various video archives of Holocaust testimonies is responsible for both these changes (Shenker 2015).

As Geoffrey Hartman, one of the founders of the Fortunoff Archive – the first institution to collect videotaped accounts of Holocaust survivors – stated, the crucial feature of video testimony is its 'minimal visuality'. The survivor is a 'talking head and embodied voice' (Hartman 2001: 118, 117), who confides her story in the attentive presence of an interviewer – the listener by default. Therefore, it is 'the embodiment of the survivors, their gestures and bearing' which adds to the interview 'immediacy and evidentiality' of a kind which is absent in audio-only oral history (Hartman 1996: 144). The pivotal element of video testimony is the very presence of the (re)traumatised body of the witness: her gestures, tics and quivers, halts, repetitions and mumblings of collapsed speech become indexes, signs which 'establish their meaning along the axis of the physical relationship to their referents' (Krauss 1987: 198), tangibly related to what they refer to: a traumatic experience from the past, which slips past through narrative means. Amit Pinchevski wrote of the Fortunoff Archive: 'Videography produces what might be called the audio-visual mark of trauma: the indexical and temporal markers of corporeality as captured by the video camera and recorded and reproduced by the videotape' (Pinchevski 2012: 147). Thus, if the era of the witness indeed began with the Eichmann's trial (Wieviorka 2006: 57), its epitome could be the performance of Yehiel De-Nur, or, as he called himself, K-Zetnik, who testified in the Jerusalem court: after delivering an obscure account of life on the Planet Auschwitz, he fainted at the stand and was taken to the hospital in a coma. 'What K-Zetnik wants is not to prove but to transmit' writes Felman in her book dedicated to Eichmann's trial (Felman 2002: 143, quoted in Hirsch and Spitzer 2009: 154). The collapsing body of the witness is the ultimate index, the residue of trauma, performatively evoked during the testimonial speech act (cf. Felman and Laub 1998: 5), a performance of 'un homme-memoire' (Wieviorka 2006: 88) – the witness construed as 'the medium of testimony' (Felman and Laub 1992: 24).

The pioneering work of the aforementioned Fortunoff Video Archive (founded in 1979 and opened to the public under the auspices of Yale University in 1982) – resulted, in its peak period of activity, in the collection of circa 4,400 interviews, many of them conducted by scholars who later authored some of the most significant works on trauma theory (Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Lawrence Langer, Geoffrey Hartman). At the end of the 1980s, the era of the witness was on the rise: the Fortunoff project was soon followed by other video testimony initiatives: the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), opened in 1993, with a current collection of 9,000 accounts, and the Shoah Foundation, established by Steven Spielberg in 1994, based, since 2006, at the University of South California, with a collection of over 52,000 personal accounts collected to date, and growing (cf. Shenker 2015). These three main institutions certainly do not close the list of organisations actively collecting and storing oral history documents, nor were they the first ones to do so.

Yet, together, they have shaped the discussion on Holocaust representation as well as the historiographical approach to this subject for years. In 2002, Aleida Assmann noted that video testimony had been established as a separate genre, certifying the leading role of memory in our current way of relating to the past (Assmann 2002: 264). Assmann was certainly aware of the puzzling nature of this statement because testimony belongs to the order of memory, not history, and its point is less to tell us what happened than to confront us with a singular experience of the traumatised self.

Yet, I would argue, the main contradiction in the Holocaust testimony genre consists in the tension between its expected uniqueness and singularity on the one hand, and the great number of such accounts on the other. Three types of processes undermine the video testimony's power of influencing its viewers and transmitting the survivor's trauma (cf. Felman and Laub 1992: 52). First is the institutionalisation of the genre, and the dominance of the established poetics of a given archive. This is especially evident in the formulaic interviews of the USC Shoah Foundation (cf. Shenker 2015), but also in the 'First Person' programme of the USHMM, which comprises the performance of survivor-volunteers who present their stories in front of an audience, and the event is live streamed on the museum's website (First Person Program, 2017). Secondly, the visual aspect of these accounts is subjected to severe conventionalisation, according to the aforementioned principle of 'minimal visibility': from the very beginning, the witnesses have always been interviewed in the neutral interiors of libraries (Fortunoff Archive), or in a very strong light against a black background (USHMM), or in the static surroundings of their living rooms. The presentation of the witness is limited to close-up and medium shots: testimony is thus performed by means of facial expressions and hand gestures, set against a motionless background. The voice of the witness resonates with the zoomed image of her face, or sometimes torso and hands, the only playground for the haunting presence of past events, conveying fragile signs of affect and trauma. Finally, there is an ongoing process of digitalisation of the archives. Only Yale's Fortunoff Archive has thus far remained analogue – with its collection of the original videocassettes stored in a temperature-controlled room, and available only for on-site access (despite a simultaneous process of digitalisation) (Pinchevski 2012: 145). In the meantime, access to the Shoah Foundation visual archive is limited, but some materials are accessible worldwide via tens of institutions, and the collection of the USHMM is in its majority available online, catalogued, indexed and searchable (USHMM Collections 2017) according to handy categories of place, type of event and period. It is due to these processes that the utterly unique testimony performed by a singular witness, in thousands of reflections of similar accounts, slowly loses its specificity and 'aura of indexicality' (Trezise 2013: 34), therefore limiting its performative, affective potential.

### Testimonial tableau

The most important genealogical trope for videos of bystanders' accounts, however, is certainly Lanzmann's *Shoah*, which, as Wieviorka stated (Wieviorka 2006: 82), revolutionised the genre of the testimony. This claim may be interpreted in at least three ways: firstly, *Shoah* provided a 'vast testimonial tableau' (Trezise 2013: 35) and iconic visual representa-

tions to all three groups of Raul Hilberg's theoretical triangle: victims, perpetrators, and bystanders (Hilberg 1992). Secondly, by compelling his witnesses to physically re-enact scenes from their past, Lanzmann displayed the phenomenon of Holocaust witnessing discussed above: the testimony conceived not as a means of transmitting intelligible knowledge, but rather as embodied trauma of the past. Thus, his goal as a filmmaker was not to render 'a simple account', but rather a 'reliving of the event', an 'incarnation of the truth' (Benzine 2015). His method became famous thanks to what were in fact, ethically, rather questionable interviews: with Szymon Srebnik, with the locomotive driver Henryk Gawkowski, or with survivor Abraham Bomba, who had worked as a barber cutting the hair of people going to be gassed in Treblinka. Bomba, convinced by Lanzmann, 'relives' his testimony and traumatic past in a barber shop in Tel-Aviv, rented for the filming: 'Truth became incarnate, and as he relived the scene, his knowledge became carnal', Lanzmann stated afterwards (Chevrie and Le Roux 2007: 41). Thirdly, *Shoah* displays Lanzmann's intuition about a specific affinity between the posttraumatic site, the gesture and the testimony itself.

As Jacques Derrida said about this triangular structure underpinning the film: 'The presentation of the trace is not a simple presentation, a representation, or an image: it takes on a body, matches gesture with speech, recounts and inscribes itself in a landscape' (de Baecque et al. 2015: 32). It is very much visible in a series of scenes which Lanzmann called 'a cascade of gestures' (Lanzmann, Larson and Rodowick 1991: 83). They concentrate on the repeated gesture of cutting a throat, made sequentially in the film by Henryk Gawkowski (a bystander) driving the locomotive, Richard Glazar (a survivor), peasants from Treblinka, Czesław Borowy (a bystander) and by Lanzmann himself. Even if, as *Shoah* outtakes prove (USHMM 1978a), the director learned about this gesture much earlier and as a matter of fact rode in the locomotive with Gawkowski, he later claimed that the gesture was made spontaneously by the driver, against the backdrop of the green countryside landscape (Lanzmann, Larson and Rodowick 1991: 83). 'Making images from reality is to dig holes in reality. Framing a scene involves excavating it. The problem of the image is to create a hollow space within a full image', Lanzmann said in the interview (Chevrie and Le Roux 2007: 39). A gesture might be interpreted as a 'hole' that punctures reality in his film – a carnal recollection, an embodiment of a past ingrained in a landscape: as in the scene with Jan Piwoński, a switchman from Sobibór, who with a stick traces the border of the camp, the line between life and death, on the ground now grown over with grass; or the scene with Szymon Srebnik, who picks up a piece of soil in the former camp to illustrate the consistency of powdered bones. Even if the exact topographic repetition of the place cannot be fulfilled, Lanzmann seems to obsessively run around at least the visual resemblance of this disturbingly idyllic landscape. In one of the scenes which was eventually cut from the film, he asks Gawkowski, in a stubborn manner: "Was the landscape at that time... did the landscape at that time resemble what it is now, these trees, this calm, this softness?" (USHMM 2008: 50). In another outtake (USHMM 1978b), Lanzmann, his translator Barbara Janicka and one of the Treblinka villagers stand together in an open field; behind them, in the distance, we notice the shape of two stones – part of the Treblinka death camp monument. The scene opens with Lanzmann lighting a cigarette and asking the man: 'Are we now on your field?'. 'No, mine is over there', the villager responds. 'Cut!', shouts Lanzmann. Then, there is a new scene, filmed in the exact place as before, and the director says: 'So this was your field'. 'Yes', the

villager confirms. Lanzmann investigates the distance between the field and the camp, the existence of the forest which concealed the camp during the war, and finally says: 'It is unbelievable how close it is'. The scandal of a now peaceful landscape, the bystander – still there, still in that ghastly scenery – and the 'incredible closeness' of the site of suffering and death, all fascinate Lanzmann and govern his cinematic imagination – even if it has to strain the truth of the account.

### To the East

Compared to Lanzmann's staged, theatrical and often excessive reenactments, most video testimonies are, in contrast, almost ascetic – monotonous and visually constrained in their form. Moreover, unlike *Shoah*, audiovisual archives mainly gather the accounts of victims, and Holocaust video testimonies became almost by default survivors' tales. Thus, in the USC Shoah Foundation's browser, words such as 'witness' or 'bystander' are not even recognised search categories; approximate to them is only 'Rescuer and Aid Provider'. Furthermore, those testimonies are of zero spatiality: the great majority of them were recorded in the closed space of a room, far away from the sites where the Shoah in fact took place: only about 1,000 out of 52,000 accounts collected by the Shoah Foundation were actually recorded in Poland. There are also very few interviews filmed outdoors (e.g. Halina Birnebaum's testimony from the USC Shoah Foundation recorded in Birkenau, or Ruvim Izrailevich Shtein's account from USHMM, shot in Babi Yar). Thus, as Hannah Pollin-Garay aptly observes, 'Holocaust testimony is analysed as being placeless' and 'the tendency to set the Holocaust on an amorphous, cultureless landscape' is dominant (Pollin-Garay 2013: 29).

Only in the late 1990s, the USHMM launched a project called 'Perpetrators, Collaborators, and Witnesses', under the supervision of Nathan Beyrak, which focused mostly on the non-Jewish witnesses to the Shoah in Central, Eastern and South Europe, and which had a different scope of interest from the dominant poetics of the genre. The project has so far gathered over 1,900 testimonies. The Polish edition resulted in the collection of 324 accounts, recorded over more than a decade since the time of launch (1998–2010): those of former prisoners of concentration camps, aid providers as well as residents of villages situated in the vicinity of death camps or towns where ghettos were established.

In the case of these testimonies, too, the poetics of minimal visuality is prevalent: interviews are usually recorded inside the witness' house, in central medium shot, in the motionless manner of a static interview. The very structure of the account, nevertheless, differs from the survivors' tales: it is less focused on the life history of the witness herself, and more on the facts related to the event in question. It is also much shorter: most interviews do not exceed 30 minutes in length. Yet, there are a few recordings (eight, in the Polish edition of the project) which move the interview outside, to the places where the persecutions of Jews had happened: to the surroundings of the camps, or to sites of everyday violence, ghettoisation and deportations.

It was an initiative of Father Patrick Desbois, a French priest researching the so-called Shoah 'by bullets' (Desbois 2008), outside the biggest extermination camps in Central and Eastern European 'bloodlands' (Snyder 2010), that to a bigger extent took Holocaust testi-

mony to the East and into the landscape. Desbois visited these terrains looking for the prison camp in Rava Ruska, in Ukraine, where his grandfather had been held during the Second World War, and had witnessed the extermination of the entire local Jewish community. Desbois' visit to the memorial site and the realisation of the prevalent 'official invisibility' (Desbois 2008: 28) of the Shoah prompted the launching of an expanded project documenting dispersed Shoah events – those undertaken as part of the Operation Reinhardt in the General Government in occupied Poland and by Einsatzgruppen following the Eastern Front in the invaded Soviet Union. The mission of the Yahad – In Unum foundation, established by Desbois in 2004, has thus been to localise individual execution sites of Jews and Roma; to find eyewitnesses of these events and to record their accounts (to capture the voices of those who 'have never spoken publicly before'); and finally, to regain memory of these events and commemorate them (Desbois 2008: xf.). Even though Desbois was not the first who included eyewitnesses who still live in the posttraumatic landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe in the 'testimonial tableau' (to emphasise again the pioneering work of Lanzmann in the 1970s), the Yahad – In Unum project was the first to focus solely on the accounts of Holocaust bystanders, as well as investigate more tangible links between the serene, yet posttraumatic landscape – perceived, until then, in a predominantly phantasmal mode – and traces of genocide in the East.

### Death in Arcadia

In Western post-war iconography, the Central and Eastern European landscape – the setting of pre-war memories of a generation of Shoah survivors, and at the same time the site of their ultimate suffering – became quite ambiguous, yet often displayed elements of *mise-en-scène*. However, if the first generation rarely came back to these original sites, it was the generation of post-memory (Hirsch 2012) who travelled behind the Iron Curtain and perpetuated the image of the equally serene and sinister landscape of forests, clearings, meadows, and field roads in literature, film and visual arts. The obvious source of this visual vocabulary were the aesthetics of the 'stylised unrepresentability' (Ball 2001: 168), introduced by Lanzmann in *Shoah*, namely extended shots of seemingly neutral elements of space which are invested with the traumatic past of the Shoah (though it is worth mentioning that these visual tropes were already present in *Night and Fog* by Alain Resnais from 1955). Eva Hoffman, key representative of the second generation of Shoah survivors, accurately portrayed this paradoxical landscape in her non-fiction book *Shtetl* (1997):

As we get into his tinny Polish Fiat, [Zbigniew] tells me that Szepletowo was a stopping point for Jews who were being transported to Treblinka. Instantly, the pleasant station building loses its air of innocence. Instantly, I flash to the scenes that must have taken place here. [...] Instantly, the landscape in my mind is diagrammed by two sets of meanings. How to reconcile them, how not to blame the land for what happened on it? (Hoffman 1997: 20f.)

In this short passage, history invests the picturesque view of a small station in a Polish provincial town with the second axis of the diagram: the memory of the events which took place there. From the moment of the identification of its 'actual' nature, the perception of this place can only be a result of these two sets of meanings. Immediately, the affective dimension of the observed space is changed: the delight with its idyllic form transforms into dumbfounded silence, and a pleasant station, a cosy coppice, and a blooming meadow will never be what they once were. 'As I walk around Brańsk with Zbyszek and contemplate its lovely views' – writes Hoffman later – 'the angled slope of the riverbank, the gentle curve of the river – I now cannot help but imagine: that flat stretch of land leading away from the river was an escape route to ostensibly safer places' (Hoffman 1997: 245). Similar experiences of fundamental discrepancy and incoherence, as well as a sense of the uncanny – when the monotonously alike or common pastoral landscapes disclose the knowledge of the events they witnessed – is shared by other second-generation authors and artists undertaking variously motivated journeys to Central and Eastern European countries. It can be found in books by Simon Schama (1996), Martin Gilbert (1997), Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer (2010); artworks by Susan Silas (2001), Dirk Reinartz (1995) and Mark Levin (1996); but also in feature films like *Ida* by Paweł Pawlikowski (2013) or *Everything Is Illuminated* by Lev Schreiber (2005, based on the book by Jonathan Safran Foer from 2002); as well as in various documentaries on 'come backs', such as *Birthplace* by Paweł Łoziński (1992), featuring Polish-Jewish writer Henryk Grynberg who searches for his father's grave in his family's village of Radoszyna, in central Poland, or *Return to Poland* (1981) and *Shtetl* (1996) by Marian Marzyński (cf. also Walker 2012). A particularly compelling scene of such a return, embedded in the posttraumatic landscape, occurs in the documentary film *Neighbours* by Agnieszka Arnold (2001) featuring Shmuel Wasserstein – one of the survivors of the Jedwabne massacre, performed by Polish residents of the town on their Jewish neighbours. Back to Janczewek, near Jedwabne, with his family and the film crew, Wasserstein shows in an empty space in a field the place where he was hiding, what was once the pigsty of Antonina Wyrzykowska. Wasserstein says: 'I feel it was somewhere here' and lies down on the grass, showing how small the hideout was. The discrepancy between the calm greenness of the meadow and the story of both miraculous survival and tragic betrayal pinpoints the contradictory nature of the landscape – the crime scene and the performative setting of a re-enactment – which I would like to examine here as a special form of the indexical in the digital age.

### Into the landscape

The aforementioned archive of the Yahad – In Unum foundation has so far gathered more than 5,728 accounts of eyewitnesses of the Shoah from eight countries in Eastern and Southern Europe – including 778 recorded in Poland, where 426 execution sites have been identified. The archive is organised according to a geographical rule: testimonies are arranged across an interactive map of towns and villages where killing sites have been recorded. The database is searchable by locations, but not by witnesses, who for safety reasons have been rendered anonymous. Fragments of the testimonies are available online, while the integral ac-



counts are accessible only upon request ('Yahad – In Unum Map' 2017). In the future, all locations are to have a short presentation, including photos from the site, fragments of transcribed interviews and archival documents, as well as a short fragment of a video interview with an eyewitness.

The aim of these interviews is simple, and it distinguishes these accounts from the survivors' testimonies on a very basic level – It is historical knowledge which is at stake here: to identify the victims, localise the killing sites and commemorate them. Yet, there are several circumstances which render those bystanders' accounts much more complex documents. Firstly, extracting factual knowledge from a witness is embedded in the very delicate process of making her come back to the past, in most cases a painful and often very troubling one, even if most of the witnesses were kids at the time. Very often, interviewees have the opportunity to talk about what they witnessed, and to be carefully listened to for the first time in their lives. Therefore, the interviews have an open, narrative structure, and they cover personal memories of a witness from the wartime, as well as the memory of the local Jewish community and specific knowledge about their execution. Secondly, bystanders' testimonies are always dedicated to someone else: thus, they are inherently auxiliary in their nature. Thirdly, similarly to survivors' accounts, these testimonies are defined by an inherent fragility due to the age of the witnesses: we are repeatedly confronted with the fact that these are the last living people who can convey this knowledge.

Finally, Yahad – In Unum accounts take the testimony into the landscape: interviews with bystanders are often conducted outdoors, in spaces where the witnesses have usually spent their whole lives, amidst surroundings which they conceptualise with vernacular vocabulary and spatial categories. Landscape thus becomes an inherent element of the interviews, carried out in households, gardens and orchards, where the topography of war overlaps with the contours of present-day buildings and sites, and is expressed by spatially idiomatic language: 'Germans were standing like from here to this pine'; 'You could traverse the whole village on the roofs'; 'I will show you the space right away'; 'There, where this white birch is, where this aspen is' (Yahad – In Unum 2010a; 2012a; 2012b; 2010b). Moreover, interviewees – usually asked by the team beforehand – often take their interlocutors to the very place 'where it happened' and tell the story *in situ*. These testimonies show the witness becoming a guide for the filming team in the space of the crime, now concealed. The bystander is thus compelled to undertake a specific role in the recreated scene from the past, and perform the history on their own, either by positioning themselves in space, or even by re-enacting the events.

I will analyse two pairs of landscape-based video testimonies of Holocaust bystanders from the two aforementioned archives, the USHMM and Yahad – In Unum, in order to show the evolution of the new genre and a possible shift in understanding indexicality in the context of testimony. I will argue that these visual documents may play a vital role in understanding the dynamics and complicated consequences of the dispersed yet ubiquitous atrocities which have taken place on these terrains, as well as in redefining the modes of perception of the phantasmal and now digitalised Central and Eastern European landscape.

## Testimonial glitch

The first pair of testimonies are two accounts from the USHMM, recorded on 15 March 1998 within the project 'Perpetrators, Collaborators, and Witnesses' – two rare examples of on-site interviews. The protagonists of the interviews are two sisters: Aleksandra Nizio (born in 1915) and Wiktoria Sałęga (born in 1913), both residents of Trawniki, Poland. Between the summer of 1941 and November 1943, in the framework of the Operation Reinhardt, the labour camp for Jewish citizens from the Lublin and Warsaw districts, as well as Jews from several other European countries, operated in Trawniki. Both sisters, residents of the building neighbouring the camp at that time, were eyewitnesses of the extermination of the camp's prisoners on 3 November 1943.

Both testimonies (originally videotaped) are available in digital versions on the website of the Museum, yet there is no indication that they are connected, and that the protagonists of the interviews are related. The interview with the younger sister, Aleksandra Nizio (born Sałęga), conducted by Michał Sobelman, is slightly longer than the other one and was recorded entirely at her home (USHMM 1998a); whereas the interview with Wiktoria Sałęga (conducted by Michał Cichy), while also recorded at the witness's home, ends with a short on-site passage, filmed on the snowy field next to the former house of the Sałęga family. The presence of the interviewers in these recordings is rather spectral: they are invisible on the screen, marking their presence only during the first seconds of every tape, when we see colour bars and hear the voices of the team talking to each other in Polish and Hebrew, or when informing witnesses about the course of the interview, coughs, laughs, sighs, and sounds of moving equipment.

The two testimonies differ. Aleksandra Nizio is much more eloquent: she depicts precisely what she was able to see via the small window of her family house, which was situated just next to the camp, and she gives a detailed description of the execution and of the killing site itself (the exact time of the execution, the number of gendarmes present, the shape of the burial pits, what was playing on the radio at the time). However, even though she remembers that her father spoke Yiddish and had Jewish friends, and that she herself had Jewish acquaintances at school, she appears to not remember any names or particular stories about the people she knew. She also repeatedly comes back to some images from wartime, often influenced by anti-Semitic stereotypes (about, for instance, Jewish passivity, or welfare), as well as to the time she had refused to cook some soup for a Jewish inmate – a decision which she would later regret. The account of Nizio's older sister, Wiktoria Sałęga (USHMM 1998b), is strikingly different: her story is barely understandable, repeatedly falling into random images, clichés and hackneyed expressions; even if she was an eyewitness of the events, she fails to convey any details. She reiterates the phrase 'I was afraid', never (unlike her sister) openly expressing the horror caused by the carnage she witnessed.

The most interesting part of Sałęga's account, however, is its 7-minutes-long on-site coda. The dynamic of the testimony rapidly changes: now we see the interviewer standing with the witness, outside, in the midst of a white field surrounded by a fence, with an old wooden house standing in it. The interview becomes more conversational in form. Also the way of filming transforms: the motionless camera is now held in hand, the image is shaken and sometimes blurred – it is a live report of a testimonial event. The interviewer asks the

witness to point at the window from which she had observed the execution; the camera follows her finger. The interviewer grabs the woman's arm, changing the direction their bodies are facing: 'So you were looking in this direction?', he interrogates. 'Yes, I saw everything.' 'So, they shot Jews here, where we are now. In this spot.' The video ends with a distinctive shot: we see the witness, alone, presented against the background of her former house, posing as if for an album photo of an explorer or a settler. Thus, we see the bystander dislocated from her observation point to the site of killing itself, presenting in a reverse gesture the point of the act of seeing. Introducing the landscape into the testimony obtains its practical goal: now, the most important element of the account is a deictic indication, pointing to the now invisible element of the crime scene and recording the gesture of a witness. By measuring space with steps, spread arms and other improvised measures, the witness and her interviewer try to visualise – but also embody – the events that the landscape seems to have forgotten. At the same time, the witness is repeating her 'topographical position with respect to an occurrence' (Felman and Laub 1992: 206), namely that of a bystander: she stands, in this re-enactment, in the unchanged spot of an onlooker who entered the scene of the events – forbidden in the past, disturbingly accessible now – reliving with terror, but also distance, the course of history. Yet, there is one glitch in this visual document: for it soon becomes clear that the person who is describing the field to the interviewer is not Wiktoria, but her sister Aleksandra, interrogated by Michał Sobelman, and the outdoor fragment was mistakenly attributed in the digital archive to the wrong witness.

**Figure 1.** Aleksandra Nizio and Michał Sobelman, Trawniki, 15 March 1998



Source: USHMM

‘Sister, older than me, she watched, she remembers more than I do. I was really scared, when I heard I ran away. I couldn’t look’ – says the witness, and she evokes the presence of Wiktoria, who had not shared a single detail of the past in her difficult account, teetering on the edge of comprehensibility. The witness of the on-site coda of the digital testimony, Wiktoria, who is in fact her sister Aleksandra, doubles and loses her identity, yet the landscape, the deictic ‘here it happened’, fixes the account to the horror of the past. It is this very tension between the spectral presence of the witness who speaks about the suffering of the Other, and a muted materiality of the site, that generates a ‘testimony effect’: the strong indexical relation to the Event.

### Performing the past

The other pair of testimonies were recorded by the team of the Yahad – In Unum foundation in Siemnice, near Lublin, on 18 August 2012, first near the homes of the witnesses, then at the killing site. Both were conducted by a French-speaking interviewer with a Polish translator; we can also hear the photographer taking pictures and other members of the team in the background during the interview.

The first witness, born in 1928 (Yahad – In Unum 2012a), tells the story of 37 Siemnice Jews (as he meticulously quotes, they were local Jews, and Jews who came to the village to work at the manor) who, on 2 October 1942, were gathered outside the manor and shot. He is filmed sitting outdoors, against a brick wall, probably of his house; later the set moves to a garden. He speaks slowly, with a slightly shaking voice, but very clearly illustrating his account with gestures; sometimes we can hear a female voice, probably of his wife. The witness recounts the names of the members of three Jewish families who lived in Siemnice, their professions (characteristically, different from the local Poles’ typical occupations), and religious customs, the locations of the Jewish cemetery and the synagogue in a nearby town. He had also assisted one family as a Shabbos goy (a non-Jew who helps Jews in performing tasks which are precluded them on the Sabbath). He recounts the first days of the war, and the transporting of three Jewish citizens to the Bełżec death camp. Asked if he saw what had happened, the witness replies quickly: ‘Of course I saw. How could I not see, like I would not be seeing you now?’. The witness describes the process of long-term, escalating violence seeping into the village’s everyday life – the conditions for Jews who came from neighbouring towns to work at the three manors (*folwark*) located around the village; the killing of the owners of one *folwark* who did not want to send their Jewish workers to Bełżec; and, finally, the gathering – on German gendarmerie’s orders passed to the village head – of all the Jews in Siemnice on the premises of one of the manors, and their execution. He describes the scene of one of the local Jews, Hajka, passing by him to join her family gathered in one of the manor’s building, right before the shooting. ‘Hajka, don’t go!’, the witness says to the camera, reliving the scene from the past, in a futile endeavour to reverse the course of the events. Afterwards, he takes the team to the site. Now we see not only the witness but also the translator, asking questions in Polish. ‘Where are you taking us?’, he asks. ‘Where they killed the Jews’, the witness replies. We accompany the witness and the filming team, walking through the cropped field towards the former killing site. ‘Where did you observe the



scene?', 'Here', the witness points his finger in one direction, and he also estimates the distance from his position to the execution site. When they get to the site, the witness indicates the burial pits, now indiscernible, and tells the story of the killing: the gathering all the Jews in one of the buildings, the arrival of four gendarmes, the victims holding hands, on their knees, and the Jewish children who turned to face their executors. What is striking, though, is his behaviour: while telling about the Jews holding hands, he suddenly grabs the translator's wrist; when asked again about the location of the site, where the Jews kneeled together at the pit, he drops to his knees in front of the translator.

**Figure 2.** Yahad – In Unum's team member with the first witness at the killing site, Siemnice, 18 August 2012



*Source:* Rita Villanueva for Yahad – In Unum

The unique, almost uncanny image of an old man kneeling by a young stranger in a peaceful field is interrupted by the appearance of the interviewer, who enters the scene for a while in order to mark with gestures the locations of the pits. The interview continues: the witness describes his frequent visits to the site after the departure of the gendarmes, the burying of the victims by Polish manor workers, and the significance of the event for the villagers. The account ends with a scene back at the witness's garden: the story about the execution of Polish villagers, who were shot by Germans in their houses as revenge for the theft of a pig, which had in reality been stolen from the manor by Polish partisans.

In another recording shot later the same day, we are introduced to a witness, born in 1927, who held a prominent social role in Siemnice: for years, he had been the village leader



(Yahad – In Unum 2012b). Once again, the witness is introduced outside his house, sitting in a wooden chair. His account of the Jews who lived there is, similarly to the previous interview, quite detailed: we learn about three Jewish families, the names of most of their members, and we find out that the witness was a friend of one of them – Puter, whom he calls ‘mój kolega Żydek’ – ‘my friend the Jew’, though the word ‘Jew’ appears in a derogatory diminutive. The witness, who was 14 years old at the time, worked at a workshop near the manor and was an eyewitness to the killing. ‘I saw it with my own eyes. We were spectating with my master’ – he says to the interviewers, without hesitation, and he goes on to very carefully describe the whole scene: men, women and little children were shot on the edge of the pit; the witness even describes a moment when one of the German soldiers ran to the workshop and vomited. ‘He was not able to look at this’, the witness emphasises, and he is visibly moved, tapping his chair. Then, the team and the witness move to the killing site, yet here the display of the scene is significantly different from that of the previous interview. We see the witness and the translator already at the site, and the man points out all the elements of the former buildings of the manor, his own position during the events, and the execution site. When he describes the Jews going to the site, he touches the translator’s arm, in order to show how the victims huddled together, commenting that they should have dispersed and tried to run away.

**Figure 3.** The second witness at the killing site, Siemnice, 18 August 2012



*Source:* Rita Villanueva for Yahad – In Unum

At the execution site, he indicates the pits with his hand, and his position as an observer. The witness illustrates his story with gestures: he shows the series of shots fired by gendarmes, the agonised movements of a victim, the pool of blood formed at the site, marked by a horizontal gesture. The dynamics of the scene changes when the interviewer appears in front of the camera and asks the witness about the pits and the positions of the victims. The interviewer bends his legs as if he was to kneel, trying to recreate the situation performed by the previous witness and provoke the current witness to repeat his movements. Yet, this time the man only confirms the interviewer's assumptions, lightly touching the arm of the translator to show the gesture of holding hands, but he never engages in more performative acts. He says 'It is not something one can survive', or 'live through' – the Polish verb *przeżyć* allows both interpretations, and thus the witness' words blur the boundary between the victims and the bystanders: is he talking about the impossibility of survival for the victims, or the impossibility to forget having lived through the trauma of witnessing such events? 'I saw it, but I could not look at this anymore', states the witness.

These two testimonies, carried out in the same spatial setting, starkly illustrate the performative structure of the re-enacted crime scene, the shifting positions of its participants and the importance of the landscape as its element. The re-enactment of the scene of killing engages as actors those – the onlookers and the foreign visitors to the site – who originally could not have appeared in the place and time of the crime. The witness thus leaves his position of safety to recreate the killing of which he was a participant, albeit hidden, and the distribution of roles shifts rapidly: he carries an imaginary rifle, he walks as a victim to the execution, or kneels at the pit, he observes the moving bodies of dying victims at the moment of killing. The interviewing team also participates in this fluctuating dynamics: the interviewer takes up the role of the victim, while trying to get the second witness to kneel; the translator becomes one of them when his arm is grabbed by the witness, in reply to the interviewer's prompt. The two accounts from Siemnice differ not only in the details of the story itself (e.g., the number of gendarmes or the children victims) but even in the very location of the killing site (this might have been the reason why the interviewer entered the scene in the second interview). Yet both display common features: the importance of the act of seeing and its consequences for the witness as a memory keeper; the openness of the witnesses in describing Polish involvement (as in the village head giving orders to the Jews, or the local firemen digging the pits and burying the bodies); the portrayal of Siemnice as a small, interconnected organism in which violence gradually changed the affective and moral structure of the community, permanently separating its ethnic Polish and Jewish components. The latter was well portrayed in the account of the first witness, when he describes that for the execution of Jewish citizens, only four gendarmes arrived, whereas for the execution of other Polish families later on, two German units gathered at the outskirts of the village.

### **I was here – I am here**

Bystanders' video testimonies, especially those performative spectacles which engage landscape, testimony and bodily gestures of a witness, seem to escape interpretational tools developed within trauma theory which interprets the testimony as predominantly a survivor's

tale. They are not therapeutic; they leave the viewers unsettled, pushed out of the clear dichotomies of victim/perpetrator; they evoke ambiguous feelings: compassion and reluctance, identification and distinction. For the position of a bystander is the most troubling in its nature – simultaneously closest and most distant in respect to the occurrence – and it is exactly this contradictory spatial characteristic which makes its reception so ambiguous. The bystanders' testimonies lay bare the network of singular points of the dispersed Shoah which permanently marked hundreds of villages and towns of Central and Eastern Europe and enable us to understand the shifting dynamics of the Hilberg's triad. These accounts show the long-lasting violence, which had permanently influenced those towns and villages, and the 'incredibly close' presence of the Shoah in the past and in the present, as well as the impassable (or rarely crossed) line running between two communities – Polish and Jewish – who had been living alongside each other in this landscape until the Event. Polish kids, staring from their hideouts at the deaths of their Jewish acquaintances and their families, remembering, after 70 years, what they witnessed, are signs of a mnemonic and affective labour which still needs to be carried out in their bystanders' society.

Moreover, in the era of dispersing indexicality, when the digital status of the testimony undermines its affective and embodied potential, bystanders' accounts – recorded at the place of the Event, in the posttraumatic landscape of Central and of Eastern Europe – offer us a possibility to redefine the notion of the indexical sign of the past. Their strong metonymic relation to the place of the trauma – which is re-enacted, relived, almost in 'Lanzmannian' manner – punctures the digital and immaterial nature of video testimony, becoming an 'experimental framework' (Rapson 2015: 8) for the memory act. According to Geoffrey Hartman, the relation between 'I was there' and 'I am here' defines the specific, dislocated status of the Holocaust video testimony (Hartman 1996: 93). In the case of the on-site accounts discussed here, it is rather a disturbing tautological relation between 'I was here' and 'I am here' which determines their dynamic. The landscape of the killing site can be thus interpreted in terms of a crime scene – a multifocal field which comprises spatial and geographical elements, as well as the performative presence of the body of a witness through which the past is evoked, re-enacted, but also at the same time narrated and staged. The crime scene is an indexical sign of the past, a 'here' unchanged in time, material yet (usually) indistinctive without the witness' deictic indication of the site of the killing, where witnesses embody their position as compassionate, indifferent, distant or gloating bystanders; but it is also a space of re-enactment which may be read in terms of theatricality, of representational conventions and visual clichés. Finally, if testimony is indeed a topographical position in respect to the occurrence – namely, to the event of the trauma of the Other – every gesture performed in the posttraumatic landscape must be understood as a statement of position in respect to the community – with or against the Other. 'As both a historical act and a re-enactment in the present, the gesture points to a community, and not necessarily a community that has a common experience, but, rather, one trying to communicate across a chasm of experiential, political and generational differences', writes Julia Creet (Creet 2005). The bystanders' testimonies recreate the crime scene as a sinister coda to the disintegration of a community of ethnic Poles and Jewish Poles: understanding the dynamics and perils of this long process may be the greater advantage of watching these documents.



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