**Abstract**

This dissertation, which deals with Holocaust memory and the moral legacy of the event in the collective memory, is being written 75 years after the end of the Second World War.

Although many people speak, narrate, and write about the Holocaust, the vivid colors in which the event has been depicted are fading. We are now witnessing the way in which, over time, Holocaust memory becomes dull, consolidated and commercialized, as it moves away from the power of the truth inscribed in memory’s non-verbal experience. The events described are intermixed with contemporary reality, and it seems as though society is ready to lay these stories aside and to narrate them in a quotidian language.

*What human truth does the Holocaust reveal? What does it command us to transmit to future generations?* These are the question that set the process of writing this dissertation in motion, as part of an attempt to create a tradition of memory with the power to influence the future. Using the testimonies of survivors, the dissertation strives to understand the power of the event and the range of its influence, and thereby to learn about the humanity of its perpetrators. These materials will be used to create a memory narrative that will be present in the here and now.

In what follows Holocaust testimony, Holocaust memory, and human nature in light of the Holocaust, are considered from an ethical perspective. As both a prelude and a background to these three central points, the dissertation discusses Auschwitz as an *archetype* of the universal human condition that arises when a subject is transformed into a social scapegoat, is ostracized, deported, and finally murdered. During the Holocaust, Jews were abandoned; as a result many lost their inner confidence and trust in the world, and found themselves in strange surroundings, homeless, and without a language. Their worldly existence dwindled to mere physical subsistence. In its introductory chapters, the dissertation addresses the existential implications of this condition. Additionally, the introduction discusses the conventional idea that the Holocaust is unrelatable, in other words, that this abject level of existence cannot be imagined because it entails indescribable excesses that amount to a taboo. In this light, the question of memory becomes even more important: How can we remember the indescribable? What will we recall of an event we cannot access?

The first chapter of the dissertation focuses on *Holocaust testimony*. It examines the *experience* of the Holocaust, the *subjective truth* of its victims, and the epistemological status of testimony. The subjective truth is embodied in testimonies, silences, and works of art that were created in the wake of the Holocaust, as well as in unconscious traces left behind by the event. This truth is not a scientific one, that is expressed in documents, factual data, or chronology; it is a truth that is present in everyday reality, and it calls upon us to open up to it on a daily basis in order to examine its significance. This truth is represented by witness testimony, testimonies and literature written by family members, and trauma literature.

The dissertation is based primarily on the testimonies of Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Robert Antelme, Jorge Semprún, Jean Améry, and the witnesses who appeared in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah.* From these testimonies we learn about the significance of the witnesses’ *experience*, and the difficulty they have in finding an appropriate language with which to express it. The raw experience embodied in testimony has been subjected to processes of memorialization and editing, which make it palatable for a not-always attentive audience; such an audience, even when it did listen, generally interpreted these texts in a manner conforming to that with which they were already familiar. *They will never know*, writes Semprún, thereby summarizing his attempt to relate his own experience. This statement reflects the feelings of many survivors. This state of affairs cast doubt on the *truth value* of Holocaust testimony, destabilizing its traditional standing and that of witness testimony in general.

The dissertation addresses this *crisis of testimony* through the insights of Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gorgio Agamben, and Claude Lanzmann. Laub argued that the Holocaust was an event that corrupted all its participants, and that none of them can thereafter be considered as impartial witnesses to the event. Historically, according to Laub, the Holocaust is *an event without witnesses*. Felman emphasized the fact that it is impossible to separate clearly between the description of facts and the perspective of the narrator who provides these descriptions, endowing them with meaning. According to Laub, the perspective of the witness – the survivor, the perpetrator, or the bystander – is always lacking, as every one of these witnesses saw only a part of the historical reality and was unable to look directly at the greater picture. Holocaust testimony, argues Felman, is the result of a *severe trauma*, that seriously affects the genre’s ability to serve in the writing of history. In *Shoah,* Claude Lanzmann shows how the most serious trauma is, in effect, ineffable. It can be read in the faces of the witnesses, in their tears and in their sweat, as well as in the helplessness that emerges from their silence. Lanzmann claims that there is a gap between the witnesses’ words and the *black sun of the Holocaust*. Jean-Francois Lyotard points to testimony’s difficulty in providing proof for the ‘Final Solution,’ as those who did not experience the gas chambers cannot bear witness to them. Moreover, testimony ‘speaks’ in a language that is not generally accepted for establishing facts in the juridical systems in which it is often delivered. For this reason, Lyotard claims, it is impossible to testify about the Holocaust. Gorgio Agamben likewise points to the hidden contradiction in Holocaust testimony, namely the fact that the Holocaust’s real witness, the Muselmann, cannot bear witness to it. According to Agamben, this unspoken testimony bears witness to those who cannot testify, the ‘Homines Sacri’ who lived a life stripped completely bare. Such testimony demonstrates the desubjectivation that took place in Auschwitz. These claims regarding the status of testimony emphasize the idea that testimony is in fact a subjective truth, an alterity that, although inaccessible, is present and must be listened to.