Publishing the Holocaust: An Inside View from the Editorial Trenches

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In his influential book, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*,[1] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi contrasts three different approaches to representing the past: history, historiography, and memory. At the risk of oversimplifying, we might think of these three modes of memorializing past events as telling what happened, choosing a specific strategy to convey what happened, and commemorating that past event in the present. In other word s, unless we have been eyewitnesses to historical events, all past events are necessarily filtered through ideology and flawed recollection. And even if we have been eyewitnesses—as police detectives know all too well—no witnesses recall what they saw accurately. Our brains are not cameras, but cameras obscura, full of shadows and distortions. Regarding Jewish history and memory, Yerushalmi points to an apparent paradox:

> Although Judaism throughout the ages was absorbed with the meaning of history, historiography itself played at best an ancillary role among the Jews, and often no role at all; and, concomitantly … while memory of the past was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian. (xiv)

If the historian has not been the primary custodian of Jewish memory, who has played that role?

In this essay I argue that publishers—and here I restrict the realm to American publishers—have been among the key custodians of our collective past. When it comes to Holocaust literature, publishers determine which books appear to tell the story of the Shoah, or more accurately, to tell the myriad stories of the Shoah, which together have created not a single image but a kaleidoscopic array of that period of Jewish history beginning roughly in 1933 and ending in 1946. Hundreds of Holocaust memoirs have been self-published, often with a survivor's family as the only or primary audience. But it is the publishers—the acquisitions editors, a gauntlet of vetters, the marketing and sales people, and the executives at a press—that determine which titles appear under a publisher's imprimatur.

1. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (University of Washington Press, 2nd edition, 1983).

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Yet in the many conferences, scholarly papers, speeches, and op-ed essays commenting on the legacy of the Holocaust, I have yet to encounter a single mention of the role publishing houses play in selecting which books best represent this pivotal moment of Jewish history. This essay is meant to correct that omission.

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When I assumed the editorial helm of The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) in 1991, I was completely new to book publishing. Before walking into my new corner office, facing the dour portrait of Henrietta Szold, the first JPS editor, I called for advice everyone I knew who was experienced in publishing or in general business. The best advice I received came from the veteran editor of a distinguished Jewish press.

"Get rid of your Holocaust pile quickly," she told me, somewhat abashedly. "When I first started here, I felt obligated to read every Holocaust memoir that came across the transom, even bringing them home to read at night. It took me months to dig out from under that pile. My advice is to read a few pages of each manuscript and then reject it—unless there's something extraordinary about that book. That's for you to decide. Don't let yourself get buried, or you'll never publish anything else."

When I walked into my office for the first time on April 1, there had been no editor at our press for eighteen months. I found myself confronting several teetering piles of manuscripts, about 75 in all, 90 percent of which were Holocaust memoirs. Hearing the echo of my colleague's caveat in my ears, I picked up each one, read a page or two, and began sorting them: by quality of writing (usually middling to maudlin), clarity of focus (generally quite narrow), tone (melodramatic, by and large), and uniqueness of story. On this last count, I quickly realized two hard truths: every one of these Holocaust stories was unique, and every one of them deserved to be told to honor the heartbreaking experience of the victim.

And yet it soon became clear to me that the veteran editor had been right. Even if I decided to publish nothing but Holocaust memoirs until I finally left my post, I would barely make a dent in the burgeoning pile. Even more problematic, were I to adopt this editorial strategy, it would leave no room for all the other valuable sorts of books that JPS could offer: Bible commentaries, rabbinic classics, histories, collections of ancient and modern midrash, feminist works, resources for holidays and Jewish ceremonies, philosophy and polemics, children's fiction, picture books, and on and on.

So, more often than not with a heavy heart, I placed almost all the submitted memoirs in the rejection pile, then crafted compassionate letters to the authors (sometimes survivors, sometimes their heirs), urging them to donate their memoirs to Holocaust museums and archives, and to invest some of their own money in self-publishing their books for the benefit of family and close friends. Most responded to my suggestions gracefully; some, however, took umbrage at my callousness. I have to admit their condemnation often hurt. Because they were right. Why shouldn't their stories reach a wide audience and honor their memories?

When the steady flow of memoirs ceased to taper off after a year or two, I brought my dilemma to the editorial committee, a distinguished group of Jewish scholars, board trustees, Jewish educators, and yes, even survivors.

"What can I do?" I asked them, sharing my own improvised method of sifting through the mountains of memoirs. "I don't want to make these weighty decisions alone."

Dr. Chaim Potok, who at that time served as chair of the editorial committee and was one of my predecessors in the editor's chair, suggested that we restrict our Holocaust list to works created during the war period: 1933 to just after the war. That would include diaries, artwork, poetry, fiction, and letters. If we did so, the whole category of memoir would no longer fit our publishing criteria.

That certainly simplified my life tremendously, although occasionally I would run across a startling memoir that begged to be published. But I held firm in order to be consistent.[2]

And yet, even with my new marching orders, publishing the Holocaust proved a vexing task.

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Who owns the Holocaust?

On first glance, the very question seems obscene. What is there to possess of this tragic period of human history? The claim that one group of victims suffered the most losses? How does

2. Ironically, before the editorial committee came up with its criteria, my very first acquisition as editor in chief was a Holocaust memoir: *A Daughter's Gift of Love* by Trudi Birger and Jeffrey Green (1992). I was captivated both by the pathos of Trudi's story—a mother and daughter keeping each other alive in the camps—and by the graceful writing, massaged by a skilled translator, Jeffrey Green. (Only later did I find out that Trudi's husband Zev ran the Jerusalem Book Fair, which certainly raised JPS's profile when we exhibited there.)

one compare scales of human suffering? Yet soon after the war, the Jewish community stepped forward to stake such a claim. Six million dead Jews represented two out of every three Jews in Europe. Even if many millions more died during World War II—ten million Russian military deaths, up to seventeen million more deaths of Russian civilians; a quarter of Europe's Roma community; millions of British, American, and European troops and countless more civilians—the fact that the Nazis focused on a "Jewish Solution" made these numbers pale. To the Jewish community in Europe, the Shoah represented the deliberate and systematic genocide of a single people. The number *Six Million* was seared into the memory of every Jew for the next several generations. Whether or not such a stance served the next Jewish generations well or only added to their loss is a story for later historians to tell.

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When it comes to writing produced during the war, who owns a Holocaust manuscript? What if the author is dead? What if the provenance of the manuscript is suspect, perhaps even criminal? Who receives royalties if the author is deceased or has disappeared? What kind of due diligence must a publisher attempt before determining authorship? How can one detect a forgery or fraud? Can a publisher edit a Holocaust manuscript if the author can no longer approve or disapprove of editorial changes? Does a Holocaust author have a veto over her own work's presentation?

Each of these ethical dilemmas confronted me during my 18-year tenure at JPS. For the most part, I was fortunate to have the collective wisdom of Chaim Potok and my editorial committee to help me make final decisions. Even if those decisions did not always meet with my approval, I felt it was better to pass on an ethically questionable acquisition than to publish it.

That lesson was brought home to me when I attended an award ceremony in 1996 honoring the English translation of a new Holocaust title, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* by Binjamin Wilkomirski, originally published by the German publisher Suhrkamp Verlag. Hailed as a Holocaust classic, this first-person account, consisting of the earliest memories by a young child imprisoned in the Majdanek concentration camp, received widespread critical acclaim and literary prizes only to be suddenly withdrawn from the market three years later, when the publisher discovered that the memoir was a fraud, written by Bruno Grosjean, a Swiss-born man who spent the war in a Swiss orphanage. Not only had Grosjean not suffered in a concentration camp as he claimed in his memoir; he was not even Jewish.

Since I was always fearful of being conned by another Wilkomirski/Grosjean fabrication, I was actually grateful to have so much vetting for any Holocaust work I acquired.

The closest I came to a "Wilkomirski moment" concerned the wartime journal of Dawid Sierakowiak, a young Jew who died in the Lodz Ghetto. One day I received a phone call from the editor in chief of a distinguished Ivy League university press, offering me Sierakowiak's diary for publication. After I got over my astonishment that such a prominent press would be ceding rights to a small, Jewish nonprofit publisher, I asked the editor why he had singled out JPS for this manuscript.

"I'm not Jewish and we're not a Jewish press," he told me. "I believe this kind of book should be published by the Jewish community, not a university press." I was even more astonished by his reasoning than by the source of the call. Since when, I asked myself, do non-Jewish presses balk at publishing Holocaust books? Had Doubleday hesitated to publish *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank in 1948? Had Hill and Wang turned down the chance to publish Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1960)? I did not understand this editor's squeamishness over publishing an eyewitness account of life in the Lodz Ghetto by fifteen-year-old Dawid Sierakowiak. Then the editor confessed why his press *really* was nervous about publishing this diary. It seems that the two men who had brought the manuscript to the university press were Polish Catholics who claimed to have found the diaries in the author's stove in Lodz. All sorts of questions surfaced from this fact: What had happened to the journal's author? Had these Poles taken over the author's apartment after he died in the ghetto in 1943? Had they had a hand in ending his life? Had they bought the manuscript on the black market from those who had murdered Sierokowiak? Would they be the ones receiving royalties from sales of the book? How could a press research the provenance of the manuscript? What if the whole thing was a hoax?

So that is why the manuscript had landed in my lap! I then understood that the other editor had figured that it was better that the Jewish community take the ethical risks in publishing this questionable manuscript than gentiles. My editorial committee quickly affirmed my hesitancy to publish. Some were even outraged by what might be construed as an antisemitic act. And so the manuscript was rejected.

But in 1996, Oxford University Press published the English translation of Dawid Sierakowiak's journal under the name of an editor and the Polish translator. Whether they were able or even concerned about vetting the provenance of the manuscript, I never discovered. But the book remains in print.

Another Holocaust work that confronted me with an ethical dilemma was *The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau* by photographer Ann Weiss (2001). This collection of black-and-white photos, grabbed in haste by Jews being deported to Auschwitz, were not scenes of horror and death but rather just the opposite: The images captured the idyllic experiences of

the victims before the Holocaust blighted their lives. Consisting mostly of family portraits, the photos showed lovers, generations of Jewish families, vacations, happy homes. The author had discovered this trove of photographs when touring the Auschwitz Museum soon after it opened. She had taken possession of the box since it had been cast aside in an unused room in the museum, and then spent years contesting her ownership not only with the Auschwitz authorities but also with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Published initially by W. W. Norton in 2001 but now out of print, Ann Weiss brought the book to JPS with a request that we reissue the book with even more photographs. I had to overcome the nervousness of my board and publisher to add this title to our publication schedule (published in 2005). I am very happy that I did. The book brings home the paradox of history and memory in the guise of objective truth. After all, what could be more neutral than a snapshot?

Ironically, one of the messages conveyed by this book's very nature is that photographs, too, can lie. Even these rosy scenes contained lies. For instance, one photo that Ann pointed out to me when she came to my office was of a young doctor and his wife holding a baby between them. At first glance, it seemed a rather conventional portrait of parents with their new child. But in her national book tour, the author learned from someone who knew this couple that they were in fact childless and had only "borrowed" the baby to make it appear that they had a child. The reissued book is filled with the photographer's encounters with eyewitnesses as she made her tour. Thus this book, more than most Holocaust titles, forces the reader to weigh the relative truths of history, historiography, and memory when trying to recapture the past.

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Historiography—the manner in which history is told—played a critical role in my decisions about Holocaust acquisitions. Few of the people who kept diaries, wrote letters, drew pictures, took photographs, and penned memoirs were professional historians. They had not been schooled in the conventions of the profession, been taught to recognize objective truth from conjecture and editorializing, or been drilled in the need to consult primary and secondary sources to corroborate testimony. They recorded through the prism of their emotions and experiences. They interpreted what they experienced through the narrow lens of their ghettoized lives. Most of them had no audience while they lived.

One of the most difficult acquisition decisions I had to make during my tenure concerned a journal written by a young woman in Krakow, Gusta Dawidsohn (Davidson) Draenger, writing under the code name Justyna. Her diary, which came to me translated from the Polish, was remarkable in many ways. First, like Anne Frank's diary, it was written from the perspective of a young woman, in this case, an 18-year-old. In addition, Justyna wrote her journal while sitting in prison

in Krakow in 1943, waiting to be executed by the Nazis. As a member of an Akiba youth group, she had been actively working against the enemy, distributing subversive literature, smuggling bullets to partisans, engaging in sabotage. And she was an inspiration to other aspiring young Zionists in her group.

Another remarkable feature of this diary was how it was written. From prison, Justyna wrote snippets on pieces of toilet paper which were smuggled out by Jewish auto mechanics working for the Gestapo. They also smuggled in paper so she could keep writing. She made four copies of every passage, keeping two in the prison and smuggling out the other two to ensure that her journal would survive. Her ploy was successful. She was eventually sentenced to death, although the precise manner of her death has not been documented.

It seemed to me, when I received this manuscript, that this was a "slam dunk" as an acquisition. Justyna's diary had already been published in Polish in 1946,[3] and its authenticity never had been challenged. The author was a wonderful writer, and the material she related was all experienced in the midst of the war. Why shouldn't JPS publish it?

The objections to publication that came from my editorial committee completely floored me. Committee members objected not to the provenance or the authorship of the manuscript but to its tone! As a romantic young woman, infused with Zionist fervor and patriotic passion, Justyna chose to present her world as a beautiful place *despite* the horrors happening all around her. Whether she chose this stance to give courage to others or to herself, hers was as legitimate a response to the Holocaust as any. Who has the right to challenge a victim's experience? Who is arrogant enough to claim that a victim is not "processing" her personal journey in the proper way?

And yet, my committee ultimately rejected this manuscript because they judged that Justyna was wearing "rose-colored glasses" when she wrote. They believed that they had a better understanding of her experiences *in retrospect* than she had while living through them.

Here's an excerpt from Justyna's journal. Judge for yourselves:

> The sun was sinking behind the forest, which extended from the outskirts of the mansion into the distance like a dark stain till it fused with the Blue Mountains in the far-off horizon. The stillness hovering luxuriantly above the orchard spread itself across the golden fields, lay down indolently in the dense pastures, circled the mansion, and expired in

3. Justyna, *Pamiętnik Justyny* (Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna, 1946). A Hebrew translation was published by ha-Ḳibuts ha-me'uḥad in 1953 (*Yomanah shel Yusṭinah*; trans. Mosheh Zinger).

> the boundless forest. Summer was at its peak. No one had returned yet from the fields. As far as the eye could see, not a soul disturbed nature's stillness with even the slightest movement. All creation seemed suspended in the heat of the summer day. In the profound silence, it was easy to forget that war was raging and blood being spilled, that violence, evil, brutality, lawlessness, human injury and pain existed on this earth.[4]

Not sharing my own committee's scruples, the University of Massachusetts Press published *Justyna's Narrative* in 1996.

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Another Holocaust manuscript that failed to pass the committee's muster was a fascinating mash-up of three parts: an authentic Holocaust testimony with a compelling provenance, book-ended by a left-wing polemical introduction and a grief-stricken father's lament and diatribe as an epilogue.

The middle section, the first-person account of a Holocaust experience, was written by a young father who escaped from the Nazis with his young son and then made his way on foot, with that young boy in tow, all the way to Israel. Along the way, the father stopped intermittently to roll up his fragments of manuscript and place them in glass bottles, which he buried on his route. And each time he entrusted another part of the diary to the earth, he told his son, "Remember where I'm burying this. After the war, come back here and retrieve it so we can publish my account." Of course, by the time they reached Israel, they were so traumatized and exhausted by their journey that neither could remember any of the secret hiding places where they had buried the manuscript fragments.

The son grew up, married, and had a son of his own. Then, in the 1982 Lebanon War, the young son was killed.

Years later, workmen doing construction in a Polish building found several of the bottles. Although the whole archipelago of manuscript fragments was never recovered, there was enough in the recovered pieces to make up a slim volume. The French publisher decided to bulk out the book by including an anti-Zionist diatribe in the front of the book. In an epilogue, the bereaved father of the slain soldier added his own opinions about the Lebanon War, to which he had sacrificed his son, pointing out all his grievances against the Israeli government.

4. Gusta Davidson Draenger, *Justyna's Narrative*, trans, Roslyn Hirsch and David H. Hirsch. eds. Eli Pfefferkorn and David H. Hirsch (University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 35.

I tried convincing the French publisher to let us publish only the middle section by itself. But they insisted that it was all or nothing. And so this fantastic story of messages in a bottle slipped through my fingers as well. As far as I know, no English language edition has ever appeared.

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Given all the strictures placed n me by the vetting process at JPS, did I manage to acquire and publish *any* Holocaust works during my 18 years as editor in chief, besides that very first memoir during my first year?

It happens that the most important acquisition of my JPS career was a Holocaust work. The story of how it came to be written, acquired, and published is almost as amazing as the work itself.

In 1993, a package landed on my desk. Since I was the only acquisitions editor for adult books, every manuscript came through my hands, even if only for a few moments. The cover letter accompanying this package sent chills down my spine. It told the story of the manuscript contained in the envelope, at this point simply called *Vedem* ("In the Vanguard" in Czech). Early in the war, the Nazis began to intern intermarried Czech Jews in the village of Terezin, which the Germans renamed Theresienstadt. One of the large rooms at the camp that housed young teenage boys, aged 13–15, was Cell Block 1. The teacher of some of these boys, a man named Walter Eisenger, made the unusual decision to live in this cell block with the boys, eventually bringing his fiancée to bunk with him.

It did not take Eisenger long to realize that, left to their own adolescent devices, the boys would not survive the rigors of the camp. They were wild, selfish, undisciplined, unaware of the dire fate awaiting them. To harness their energy, Eisenger suggested to the boys that they "publish" a teen magazine for themselves. Each boy would write an article every week. It would be typed up on the secret typewriter they smuggled into their quarters. And then, each Friday night, behind the blackout shades and by candlelight, the young authors would read their articles aloud to the others. Eisenger wisely chose Petr Ginz, the oldest of the boys at 16 and already showing great talent as a writer and artist, to serve as editor of the journal.

And so, for the next two years, between 1942 and 1944, the approximately one hundred boys of Cell Block 1 "published" one copy of the magazine, *Vedem*, each week. And then they hid that single issue under the floorboards of their cell block. Contrary to what one might expect, the magazine was lively and upbeat, despite being composed in the middle of a concentration camp. There were interviews—of the bakers, the nurses, the crematoria operators. There was coverage of the boys' soccer games; reviews of operas, plays, and concerts performed in the camp; jokes,

stories, cartoons, and poems. Of all the material, the poetry was the darkest, but even these uplifted the boys' spirits.

In the early spring of 1945, the camp's commandant announced that the camp was being liquidated. All the boys from Cell Block 1 were to be transported to Auschwitz. But one boy was the son of the camp blacksmith, who threatened the commandant: "If my son leaves, I go with him. Then who will shoe your horse?" So that one boy, Zdenec Taussig, remained behind with his father, and together they hid the copies of the magazine in the stable. Only fifteen of the original boys survived the war. One of them, George Brady, took the manuscript from Zdenec, and brought it with him to Toronto, where he became a successful plumber. He paid to have the Czech manuscript translated into English and then asked his rabbi where to send it to be published. Fortunately for me, the rabbi recommended JPS, so the package landed on my desk.

I eagerly dove into the manuscript and discovered to my chagrin that the translation was execrable. Hardly recognizable as English. I immediately contacted George Brady, told him that I wanted to publish the book, but explained that it would have to be retranslated. (On very rare occasions and against company policy, I sometimes decided to acquire a book *before* showing it to the editorial committee. Although I had my hand slapped a few times for my subversive tactics, more often than not I was supported in my decision. That is how I published Avivah Zornberg's first book, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, after only three weeks on the job.)

George agreed to pay for a new translation, and we had the good fortune to secure Václav Havel's own translator. The result was *We Are Children Just the Same: Vedem, The Secret Magazine by the Boys of Terezin*, with a foreword by Václav Havel (2013).

Not only is this publication unique in being composed by teenage boys, it embodies a rare spirit of optimism, humor, and camaraderie in the midst of the worst circumstances. When it came out, the book was featured on *60 Minutes* with Ted Koppel and later won the 1994 National Jewish Book Award. When the ill-fated Challenger went up in 1995, Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon carried with him a copy of a drawing by Petr Ginz, who unfortunately did not survive to enjoy the honor. If you go to Terezin today, you will be greeted with a display behind glass of several Holocaust items, primary among them a copy of *We Are Children Just the Same.*

If I had published only this single book during my tenure at JPS, *dayenu*. It would have been enough.

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Who then owns the Holocaust?

Many ethical issues remain in the field of Holocaust publishing, including this one. As the last survivors pass away, will they leave behind first-person accounts that they have been holding on to secretly all this time? Are there memoirs—by survivors, by survivors' children and grandchildren—that deserve to be published and studied? What works still lie buried in bottles, milk cans, stoves, and trunks throughout Europe? Who will decide when we have had enough? What roles should history, historiography, and memory play in answering these questions? Will we always afford a privileged place to narratives about the Holocaust, or will these stories join the other catastrophes of Jewish history documented and memorialized on Tisha B'Av? Are we even permitted to debate such questions?

I feel especially honored to have played a small role in wrestling with some of these questions. I am proud that I was able to bring *Vedem* back to life I agree with Yerushalmi that the historian is not the primary custodian of Jewish history. Rather, it is Jewish collective memory, some of it recounted in published books, that will preserve that history for generations to come.