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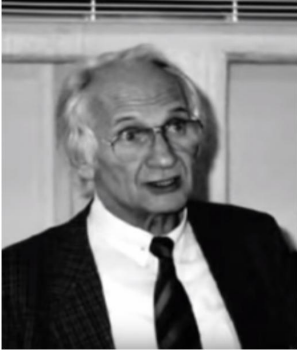
## Historiography of Holocaust Testimonies

### **Document Packet**

# What Is the Role of Survivor Testimony and Voices of Victims in the Study of the Holocaust?

## SOURCE 1: Martin Broszat, “The Concentration Camps, 1933–1945,” in *Anatomy of the SS State*, originally published in German in 1965.

### CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE: INTRODUCTION



Martin Broszat (1926–1989) was one of the earliest and most influential West German historians to write about the Third Reich and the Holocaust. He was six years old when the Nazis came to power and nineteen when the war ended in 1945. He joined the Hitler Youth as a teenager, and in the early 2000s there was controversy concerning his possible attempt to join the Nazi Party in 1944. British historian Ian Kershaw has argued that “Broszat’s driving incentive was to help an understanding of how Germany could sink into barbarity. That he himself had succumbed to the élan of the Nazi Movement was central to his motivation to elucidate for later generations how it could have happened.”<sup>1</sup> In postwar Germany, Broszat contributed his expertise during several trials of Nazi perpetrators. He also became a leading scholar at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich. In his many books, he analyzed the structures of the Nazi state and how Nazi policy toward Jews evolved to culminate in genocide.

Broszat initially wrote “The Concentration Camps, 1933–1945” as an expert report for the prosecution in the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, which took place in the early 1960s. In this trial, over twenty former Auschwitz personnel were charged for crimes they had committed during the Holocaust. The Holocaust is the most thoroughly documented atrocity in history because the Nazis themselves kept meticulous [records](#) of their actions. Broszat analyzed these documents to describe how the Nazi camps were created and how they functioned. He showed the extensive knowledge that can be gained from Nazi government documents, but he was also aware of some limits of such documents as historical sources. In 2010, historians Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann indicated that Broszat’s 1965 analysis of the Nazi camp system had “served as the gold standard of camp studies for several decades.”<sup>2</sup>

Broszat was very skeptical of eyewitness accounts as historical sources. He did not use diaries, memoirs, or testimony in his analysis of Nazi concentration camps. Excerpts below provide brief examples of what a scholar can learn by studying Nazi government documents. They are also examples of Holocaust history written without firsthand individual witness accounts.

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<sup>1</sup> I. Kershaw, “Beware the moral high ground,” *H-Soz-Kult*, February 24, 2004, [www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/fddebate-132084](http://www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/fddebate-132084).

<sup>2</sup> J. Caplan and N. Wachsmann, eds., *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

## BROSZAT: CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

### EXCERPT 1: SCOPE AND GOALS OF BROSZAT'S ESSAY

Broszat was one of four historians who wrote expert reports for the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial. The reports were written in German. After the trial concluded in 1965, the four historians published their reports together as the book *Anatomy of the SS State*. Broszat's essay focused on Nazi concentration camps, while the other historians analyzed the Nazi persecution of Jews, the SS, German society, and Nazi executions of Soviet prisoners of war. The book was published in English in 1968, and in translation Broszat's essay was titled "The Concentration Camps, 1933–1945."

This excerpt comes from the English translation of Martin Broszat's "Introductory Note," in which he outlined the scope and goals of his study, as well as his most important findings.

"The following account, produced as expert evidence for the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, is not itself a fully comprehensive history of the National Socialist concentration camps, but it perhaps provides the framework for one. Its primary aim is to describe the chronological development of the concentration camps, the structure of their organization and leadership, and their function, importance and effects which underwent a considerable change during the twelve years of National Socialist rule. There was no planned system of concentration camps from the start. It was only gradually that the camps grew into a permanent, expanding institution of the Hitler State."

—M. Broszat, "The Concentration Camps 1933–1945," 399

### Vocabulary

**SS:** the most powerful Nazi security force; the SS was in charge of concentration camps and mass murder.

**National Socialist:** Nazi.

**comprehensive:** complete.

## **BROSZAT: ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES**

### **EXCERPT 2: NAZIS SET UP NEW CONCENTRATION CAMPS IN 1940**

In his essay, Broszat first examined the establishment and role of concentration camps in Nazi Germany before the war, between 1933 and 1939. He then analyzed how the camp system changed during the war and the Holocaust. This excerpt comes from his analysis of how the Nazis expanded the concentration camp system during the early years of the war, between September 1939 and March 1942.

“In the winter of 1939/40 Himmler asked the Inspector of Concentration Camps to examine the possibility of setting up new camps and to report whether existing camps or provisional police prisons could be expanded. On the basis of the information received a number of new concentration camps were set up in the spring and summer of 1940: in June 1940 Auschwitz camp [ . . . ], composed of old barracks dating from the time of the Empire when Auschwitz was part of Austrian Galicia [ . . . ]

A report from the Inspector of Concentration Camps of 21 February 1940 to Hitler reads:

‘Auschwitz, a former Polish artillery barracks (stone and wood structures) is suitable for use as a quarantine camp after some sanitary and structural defects have been dealt with.’

The report shows that on first inspection the buildings and the locality were not regarded as obviously suitable for a big concentration camp.”

—M. Broszat, “The Concentration Camps 1933-1945,” 473–74

### **Historical Evidence and Sources**

The report Broszat references was among the Nazi government documents compiled for the Nuremberg Trials. [German](#) and [English](#) text of this document is provided by the [Nuremberg Trials Project](#) at the Harvard Law School.

### **Vocabulary**

[Heinrich Himmler](#): head of the [SS](#).

*Inspector of the Concentration Camps*: head of the Nazi concentration camp system.

*provisional*: temporary.

*Galicia*: a historically multiethnic region in Eastern Europe.

## BROSZAT: ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES

### EXCERPT 3: GROWING NUMBER OF CONCENTRATION CAMP PRISONERS IN 1944

After examining how the Nazis expanded concentration camps in the early years of the war, Broszat analyzed how they made decisions about exploiting the prisoners' labor. To do this, he examined a large number of documents from the Main Administration and Business Office (WVHA) of the SS and other branches of the Nazi government. He concluded his essay by describing how the number of concentration camp prisoners increased in 1944 and 1945. This excerpt comes from this final section of Broszat's study.

"On 5 April 1944 the head of the WVHA proudly announced to Himmler the existence of a total of twenty concentration camps with an additional 165 subsidiary labor camps [footnote 3] [ . . . ]

According to a WVHA report of 15 August 1944 the total number of concentration camp inmates was 524,286 persons, 379,167 of whom were men and 145,119 women [footnote 1]. But even then the highest level had not been reached. Particularly in the last months of the war during the withdrawal of troops from the East further tens of thousands of Jews and other forced labor from the occupied countries were transferred to concentration camps in the Reich and pressed into labor detachments."

—M. Broszat, "The Concentration Camps 1933–1945," 503–4

#### Historical Evidence and Sources

Broszat's footnote 3 on page 503 reads: "Nuremberg Document NO-020." It refers to the Nazi documents compiled for the Nuremberg Trials. [German](#) and [English](#) versions of this document are provided by the [Nuremberg Trials Project](#).

Broszat's footnote 1 on page 504 reads: "Nuremberg Document NO-399." [German](#) and [English](#) versions of this document are provided by the [Nuremberg Trials Project](#).

#### Vocabulary

*WVHA*: Main Administration and Business Office of the [SS](#).

*subsidiary*: secondary, auxiliary.

*Reich*: Nazi Germany.

## SOURCE 2: Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (2007).

### CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE: INTRODUCTION



Saul Friedländer (b. 1932) is a renowned historian and Professor Emeritus of History at UCLA. His two-volume *Nazi Germany and the Jews* changed the study of the Holocaust. In it, he proposed an integrated history of the Shoah—a history that spans many countries and relies on diverse sources, including both official documents created by perpetrators and individual accounts given by the victims. His analysis centers the diverse voices and perspectives of Jewish victims and others who experienced this traumatic period.

Friedländer was born to a Czech-German-Jewish family in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1932. After Nazi Germany took Prague in March 1939, his parents fled with him to France. In 1942, when he was ten years old, his parents sought to protect him by putting him in the care of a Catholic boarding school in France. They then attempted to escape deportation. He survived the war at the school. His parents were captured and murdered in Auschwitz. After the war, Friedländer joined the Zionist movement and immigrated to Israel, studied there, and served in the Israeli Army. He later studied in France and Switzerland, held posts in the Israeli government, and joined the Peace Now initiative in the 1980s. In 1988, he joined the History Department at UCLA.

In 1987, Friedländer and Broszat publicly exchanged a series of letters about how to write the history of Nazi Germany. The exchange took place in the context of a broader debate among German historians. Among other things, Friedländer objected to Broszat’s distinction between “the rational discourse of German historiography” and “the mythical memory of the victims.”<sup>3</sup> He argued that it is essential to include the voices of victims in the history of the Holocaust. And, he emphasized, historians need to recognize how their own backgrounds and experiences might affect their scholarly analyses.

After this exchange, Friedländer wrote *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, publishing the first volume in 1997 and the second in 2007. In these books, he brought together an immense variety of sources, with a bibliography of over sixty pages. His narrative juxtaposes military, economic, logistical, and other aspects of the Holocaust with the voices and experiences of Jews as well as other contemporaries. Excerpts quoted below were chosen to provide a small window into how Friedländer included the voices of victims in his narrative.

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<sup>3</sup> S. Friedländer, letter to M. Broszat, in *Reworking the Past*, ed. P. Baldwin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 110.

## FRIEDLÄNDER: CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

### EXCERPT 1: VICTIMS' ACCOUNTS AS HISTORICAL SOURCES

In the "Introduction" to *The Years of Extermination*, Friedländer outlined his perspective and methodology. He also considered the many challenges involved in writing an integrated history of the Holocaust. This excerpt comes from the final part of the "Introduction," where he argues for the inclusion of the voices of victims in the study of the Shoah.

"The history of the destruction of the European Jews at the individual level can be reconstructed from the perspective of the victims not only on the bases of postwar testimonies (court depositions, interviews, and memoirs) but also owing to the unusually large number of diaries (and letters) written during the events and recovered over the following decades. These diaries and letters were written by Jews of all European countries, all walks of life, all age groups, either living under direct German domination or within the wider sphere of persecution. Of course the diaries have to be used with the same critical attention as any other document, especially if they were published after the war by the surviving author or by surviving family members. Yet, as a source for the history of Jewish life during the years of persecution and extermination, they remain crucial and invaluable testimonies [ . . . ]

Beyond their general historical importance, such personal chronicles are like lightning flashes that illuminate parts of a landscape: They confirm intuitions; they warn us against the ease of vague generalizations. Sometimes they just repeat the known with an unmatched forcefulness. In the words of Walter Laqueur: 'There are certain situations which are so extreme that an extraordinary effort is needed to grasp their enormity, unless one happened to be present' [footnote 13]."

—S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*, xxiv–xxv

### Historical Evidence and Sources

Friedländer's footnote 13 to page xxv reads: "Walter Laqueur, "Three Witnesses: The Legacy of Viktor Klemperer, Willy Cohn and Richard Koch," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 10, no. 3 (1996), p. 266." This article is [available online](#).



## FRIEDLÄNDER: CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

### EXCERPT 2: INDIVIDUAL VOICES AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY

This text follows directly after the end of “Excerpt 1” above.

“Up to this point the individual voice has been mainly perceived as a trace, a trace left by the Jews that bears witness to and confirms and illustrates their fate. But in the following chapters the voices of diarists will have a further role as well. By its very nature, by dint of its humanness and freedom, an individual voice suddenly arising in the course of an ordinary historical narrative of events such as those presented here can tear through seamless interpretation and pierce the (mostly involuntary) smugness of scholarly detachment and ‘objectivity.’ Such a disruptive function would hardly be necessary in a history of the price of wheat on the eve of the French Revolution, but it is essential to the historical representation of mass extermination and other sequences of mass suffering that ‘business as usual historiography’ necessarily domesticates and ‘flattens’ [footnote 14].

Each of us perceives the impact of the individual voice differently, and each person is differently challenged by the unexpected ‘cries and whispers’ that time and again compel us to stop in our tracks. A few incidental reflections about already well-known events may suffice, either due to their powerful eloquence or their helpless clumsiness; often the immediacy of a witness’s cry of terror, of despair or of unfounded hope may trigger our own emotional reaction and shake our prior and well-protected representation of extreme historical events.”

—S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*, xxv–xxvi

#### Historical Evidence and Sources

Friedländer’s footnote 14 to page xxvi reads: “For a very close position, see Tom Laqueur, “The Sound of Voices Intoning Names,” *London Review of Books* (1997), pp. 3ff. This article is [available online](#).

## FRIEDLÄNDER: ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES

### EXCERPT 3: PRIMO LEVI ARRIVES IN AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

Friedländer used chronological periods as chapter titles. The excerpt below comes from the chapter “March 1943–October 1943.” Before this excerpt, Friedländer analyzed how Auschwitz, initially a slave-labor camp, expanded and became an extermination center. In this excerpt he talks about [Primo Levi](#) (1919–1987), who was an Italian-Jewish chemist and survivor of Auschwitz. After the war, Levi became one of the most widely read Holocaust writers. This is one of several places in *The Years of Extermination* where Friedländer cites Levi.

“Primo Levi, whose journey to Auschwitz we described, was a twenty-four-year-old chemist from Turin who had joined a small group of Jews hiding in the mountains above the city, within the loose framework of the Resistance organizations *Guistizia e Libertà* (Justice and Liberty). On December 13, 1943, Levi and his companions were arrested by the Fascist militia and, a few weeks later, transported to the Fossoli assembly camp. By the end of February 1944 the Germans took over. On February 22 the 650 Jews of the camp were deported northward.

“The climax [of the four-day journey] came suddenly,” Levi later wrote “The door opened with a crash, and the dark echoed with outlandish orders in that curt, barbaric barking of Germans in command which seems to give vent to millennial anger. . . . In less than ten minutes all the fit men had been collected together as a group. What happened to others, to the women, to the children, to the old men, we could establish neither then nor later: The night swallowed them up, purely and simply. Today, however, we know . . . that of our convoy no more than ninety-six men and twenty-nine women entered the respective camps of Monowitz Buna and Birkenau, and that of all the others more than five hundred in number, not one was living two days later’ [footnote 115].”

—S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*, 504

#### Historical Evidence and Sources

Friedländer’s footnote 115 to page 504 reads: “Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, pp. 19–20. Exactly 536 members of Levi’s transport were immediately gassed. See Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist* (Woodstock, NY, 2000), p. 105.”

## FRIEDLÄNDER: ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES

### EXCERPT 4: RUTH KLUGER ARRIVES IN AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

This excerpt follows directly after the end of “Excerpt 3” above. [Ruth Kluger](#) (1931–2020) grew up in a Jewish family in Vienna and was six years old when the Nazis occupied the city in the spring of 1938. During the war, she was imprisoned in several Nazi concentration camps. She escaped the Nazis as the war was ending. After the war, she and her mother immigrated to the United States, and she later became a professor of German literature at the University of California, Irvine. She published her memoir in 2001, and Friedländer cites it several times in his book.

“About her arrival in Birkenau at the age of twelve, Ruth Kluger remembered that when the doors of the freight car were unsealed, unaware that one had to jump, she fell off the ramp: “I got up and wanted to cry,” she reminisced,” or at least sniffle, but the tears didn’t come. They dried up in the palpable creepiness of the place. We should have been relieved . . . to be breathing fresh air at last. But the air wasn’t fresh. It smelled like nothing on earth, and I knew instinctively and immediately that this was no place for crying, that the last thing I needed was to attract attention.” Kluger then noted the same welcoming party as Levi: “We were surrounded by the odious, bullying noise of the men who had hauled us out of the train with the monosyllables ‘raus, raus’ (get out), and who simply didn’t stop shouting as they were driving us along, like mad, barking dogs. I was glad to be walking safely in the middle of our heap of humanity [footnote 116].”

—S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*, 504–5

#### Historical Evidence and Sources

Friedländer’s footnote 116 to page 505 reads: “Kluger, *Still Alive*, p. 94.” This refers to Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press, City University of New York, 2001).

## FRIEDLÄNDER, ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES

### EXCERPT 5: THE FATE OF KOVNO AND ŁÓDŹ GHETTOS IN 1943

This excerpt comes from the chapter “October 1943–March 1944.” It is from a section where Friedländer discusses the fate of the Kovno and Łódź ghettos. He indicates that the Kovno ghetto was turned into a concentration camp in the fall of 1943, and Himmler planned to convert the Łódź Ghetto into a concentration camp as well. Friedländer then analyzes Nazi government documents to reconstruct the Nazi leaders’ decision-making process. Those decisions led to the liquidation of the Łódź Ghetto instead, and the excerpt below is the conclusion of Friedländer’s analysis.

“On February 14, 1944, Greiser wrote a rather abrupt letter to the chief of the WVHA:

‘The ghetto in Litzmannstadt is not to be transformed into a concentration camp. . . .The decrees issued by the Reichsfuhrer on June 11, 1943, will therefore not be carried out. I have arranged the following with the Reichsfuhrer.’ Greiser went on to inform Pohl that (a) the ghetto’s manpower would be reduced to a minimum; [ . . . and (e) ‘After all Jews are removed from the ghetto and it is liquidated, the entire grounds of the ghetto are to go to the town of Litzmannstadt [note 146].’

As their fate was being sealed, the unsuspecting inhabitants of the ghetto went on with the misery of their daily life plagued by hunger, cold, endless hours spent in workshops, exhaustion, and ongoing despair. And yet the mood also changed on occasion, as on December 25, 1943, for example, the first day of Hanukkah: ‘There are gatherings in larger apartments. Everyone brings a small appropriate gift: a toy, a piece of *babka* (cake), a hair ribbon, a couple of brightly coloured empty cigarette packages, a plate with a flower pattern, a pair of stockings, a warm cap. Then comes the drawing of lots; and chance decides. After the candles are lighted, the presents are handed out. Ghetto presents are not valuable, but they are received with deep gratitude. Finally, songs are sung in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish, as long as they are suitable for enhancing the holiday mood. A few hours of merrymaking, a few hours of forgetting, a few hours of reverie’ [note 147].”

—S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*, 585

## Historical Evidence and Sources

Friedländer's footnote 146 to page 585 reads: "Ibid., p. lxii." This refers to the book *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto, 1941–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), edited by Lucjan Dobroszycki. Dobroszycki was a survivor of the Łódź Ghetto, and this book was a partial English translation of a compilation of daily bulletins produced by the Łódź Ghetto leaders between 1941 and 1945. The bulletins included contributions from inhabitants, as well as information about cultural events, living conditions, and other aspects of life in the ghetto. Page lxii is from Dobroszycki's introduction, where he cites a 1944 Nazi report. The full text of the [English](#) translation of this report can be found at the [Nuremberg Trials Project](#).

Friedländer's footnote 147 to page 585 reads: "Ibid., p. 422–23." It refers to the same book. The excerpt Friedländer cites is from "Sketches of Ghetto Life: Chanukah in the Ghetto, 1943," which had been published in the ghetto's daily bulletin. Dobroszycki indicated that the initials of the person who wrote this essay were not fully legible; their name may have been O. Singer.

## Vocabulary

*liquidation*: destruction.

*Litzmannstadt*: Łódź, a city in central Poland.

### **SOURCE 3: Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (2010).**



Christopher R. Browning (b. 1944) is among the most influential American historians of the Holocaust, best known for his analysis of Nazi perpetrators in his 1992 book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. He is currently Professor Emeritus of History at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is the author of several books and numerous articles about Nazi policy, perpetrators, and Jewish experiences of the Holocaust.

In 2010, Browning published another book, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*. He started working on it when he learned about the trial and unjust acquittal of Walther Becker. During the Holocaust, Becker had been a Nazi official in charge of Security Police in a district in central Poland. On October 27, 1942, he participated in the liquidation of the Jewish ghetto in the town of Wierzbnik. As Browning recounts, during this action “close to 4,000 Jews were sent to their deaths in the gas chambers of Treblinka, some sixty to eighty Jews were murdered on the spot, and about 1,600 Jews were sent to three slave-labor camps in nearby Starachowice.”<sup>4</sup> During Becker’s 1972 trial in Hamburg, Germany, dozens of survivors testified about his active participation in killing and beating Jewish people during the liquidation of the ghetto. The judge, however, discredited the survivors and their testimonies, claiming that they were unreliable and lacked objectivity and distance. He ruled that Becker was not guilty.

When he learned about this, Browning began investigating the history of the slave-labor camps around the Nazi munitions factory in Starachowice. Since there was virtually no surviving wartime documentation of these camps, Browning relied on survivor testimonies collected between 1945 and 2006. Some of these testimonies were given at Becker’s trial, others were collected immediately after the war, and still others were given decades later. Browning also interviewed some of the survivors himself. Altogether, he analyzed testimonies from 292 survivors.

The recovery of historical facts almost exclusively from survivor testimonies is not typical in Holocaust scholarship. More often, historians have access to other types of sources as well, and Nazi government documents continue to be an important source in Holocaust scholarship. And many scholars study testimonies with a focus on individual and collective memory. Excerpts below provide a few brief examples of how Browning carried out his analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> C. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 1.

## **BROWNING: CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE**

### **EXCERPT 1: TESTIMONY, HISTORY, AND MEMORY**

In 2013, three years after the publication of *Remembering Survival*, Browning published an essay about how he analyzed testimonies when working on the history of the Starachowice slave-labor camps. The excerpt below comes from this essay about the challenges and value of working with survivor testimony.

“For many scholars, memory and postwar testimony are themselves the object of study, not the events being remembered. In particular, the ‘authenticity’ of the testimony is the prime value, revealing how survivors felt about their experiences, how they constructed their narratives, and how they have coped with their traumatized past. From this point of view, concerns about ‘factual accuracy’ are inappropriate and misplaced. Indeed, to subject survivor testimony to the methods of historical scrutiny and criticism that are deemed normal for other forms of evidence can seem to be a cold act of disrespect. For a historian of my age and background, it can seem to be even an act of presumption and hubris. But if survivor testimony is to be used as historical evidence for the reconstruction of what happened, then issues of factual accuracy cannot be set aside. Some conflicting testimonies simply represent an inevitable difference in vantage point and perspective and remind us that different people not only remember but even experienced differently the same events, at the same time and place. Sometimes, however, conflicting testimonies simply cannot be reconciled, and the historian has to make critical judgments and choices. In using survivor testimonies as historical evidence, it is vital for the historian to keep in mind that the event and the memory of the event are not the same thing.”

—C. Browning, “Holocaust History and Survivor Testimony: Challenges, Limitations, and Opportunities,” in *Against the Grain: Jewish Intellectuals in Hard Times*, 280–81

## **BROWNING: CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE**

### **EXCERPT 2: TESTIMONY AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE**

This excerpt is the concluding paragraph of Browning's 2013 reflection about working with testimonies as historical sources.

“There are many ‘black holes’ in the surviving documentation of the Holocaust. For many events, if we do not use survivor testimony, we must forego any attempt to write their history at all. In my opinion these topics are too important to be passed over simply to avoid the challenges of using survivor testimony. But this evidence must be used with care and subjected to the same critical historical methods that the profession applies to all other evidence; otherwise, one risks discrediting not only survivor testimony as useful evidence but also the reputation and integrity of Holocaust scholarship itself. All kinds of evidence are problematic in their own right; the crucial issue is acknowledging and taking these problems into account rather than ignoring the problematic evidence itself. Indeed, if the historian must wait until he or she has perfect evidence, very little history would ever be written.”

—C. Browning, “Holocaust History and Survivor Testimony: Challenges, Limitations, and Opportunities,” in *Against the Grain: Jewish Intellectuals in Hard Times*, 284



## **BROWNING: ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES**

### **EXCERPT 3A: WITNESS ACCOUNTS OF A TRANSFER OF PRISONERS**

In *Remembering Survival*, Browning analyzed the history of the Jewish community in the town of Wierzbnik, life in the Wierzbnik ghetto, and the liquidation of the ghetto in 1942. He then reconstructed the experiences of those who were imprisoned in slave-labor camps near a munitions factory in Starachowice, a neighboring town. In the summer of 1944, the Nazis closed down two smaller camps near Starachowice and transferred the prisoners to a newly constructed main camp on the grounds of the munitions factory.

The following excerpts are from Browning's analysis of this forced transfer of prisoners. He examines the testimonies of twelve witnesses to reconstruct an event involving Guta Blass, a young Jewish woman. He brings together testimonies given over the course of several decades, exploring where they agree and where they differ. He begins with a testimony given by one of the Jewish prisoners, Meir Lewental, in 1945.

"After the Jews from the lumberyard were unloaded at the main camp that evening, a dramatic event occurred that was described by no fewer than twelve witnesses. To illustrate the challenges and opportunities of using such evidence, I would like to examine in detail the testimony concerning this incident. The earliest testimony of the entire collection, by Meir Lewental, was given in Łódź on May 26, 1945. He stated that when the Tartak prisoners arrived at the factory camp, the silence convinced one woman among them that all the prisoners there had already been killed. She then attacked the head of the *Werkschutz*, who managed to pull out his pistol and shoot twice but missed. She was able to hide but came out when ordered. However, thanks to the intervention of a higher-ranking officer, she was left alone [footnote 26]."

—C. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, 210

#### **Historical Evidence and Sources**

Browning's footnote 26 to page 210 reads: "USHMM, RG-15.084m (Meir Lewental, 1945)." This refers to Meir Lewental's testimony in the collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This testimony was collected by the Central Jewish Commission in Poland; a description is [available online](#) at the USHMM.

#### **Vocabulary**

*Tartak*: lumber mill, site of one of the slave-labor camps closed down by the Germans.  
*Werkschutz*: factory security force.

## BROWNING, ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES

### EXCERPT 3B: WITNESS ACCOUNTS OF A TRANSFER OF PRISONERS

Browning then analyzes three other testimonies given between 1945 and 1948 by Mendel Kac, Kalman Eisenberg, and Josef Kohs. In the excerpt below, he analyzes the information that can be gleaned from these testimonies and the one given by Meir Lewental.

“In four early accounts given in three different countries, we see the same incident recounted—about a young female prisoner attacking the head of the Ukrainian camp guards at the moment the Jews of Tartak were brought into the main camp. However, the accounts lack unanimity in important ways. Only three note that the attacker was spared, and only two provide differing explanations of the very unusual behavior of the Germans in this regard. These accounts also differ on the identification of the man who made the decision to spare the woman. Meir Lewental refers only to a higher-ranking officer. Kalman Eisenberg’s description refers to the insatiable greedy camp commandant, presumably Baumgarten, while Josef Kohs names Becker, the head of the German police in Starachowice. Only the fourth account identified the attacker, Blasowna, and the commander of the camp guards, Schroth, by name.”

—C. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, 212

#### Vocabulary

*Ukrainian camp guards*: after the invasion of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany drafted thousands of Soviet citizens—many Ukrainians, prisoners of war, as well as civilians—to serve in the camps and killing operations. See the [example of Trawniki](#), although this practice was more widespread than this one example.

## **BROWNING: ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES**

### **EXCERPT 3C: WITNESS ACCOUNTS OF A TRANSFER OF PRISONERS**

After examining four testimonies given shortly after the war, Browning analyzes three testimonies from the war crime trials of Nazi perpetrators in the 1960s. He then turns to testimonies given by survivors in the 1980s and later. In the excerpt below, he focuses on these later testimonies.

“Four late testimonies also mention the incident. One witness, in an audiotaped interview in 1986, recalled that the night the lumberyard prisoners had been taken to the main camp by truck, one woman attacked Schroth, who shot her. She pretended to be dead and then crawled under the barracks. The next day, when the Germans could not find the body, the prisoners bribed Schroth to spare her [footnote 34]. A second witness account of 1988 related how, after the lumberyard prisoners had been taken to the main camp, the Germans got pleasure and enjoyment from scaring them. They separated the men and the women and took people off into the dark. One strong woman then jumped on a small German soldier and almost choked him. After that, the Germans did not play games anymore but took the prisoners to their barracks. The woman was shot but amazingly not killed, and by an unexplained ‘miracle,’ the commandant let the woman live [footnote 35].”

—C. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, 213

#### **Historical Evidence and Sources:**

Browning’s footnote 34 to page 213 reads: “MJH, RG-1383 (Pola Funk, 1986).” This refers to the testimony of Pola Funk in the [collections](#) of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York.

Browning’s footnote 35 to page 213 reads: “FA, T-1682 (Mania K., 1988).” This refers to the testimony of Mania K. in the collections of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. This testimony was taped in Illinois by one of the Fortunoff Archive’s affiliate projects. Mania K’s [full testimony](#) can be viewed at any of the Fortunoff Archive’s [access sites](#). Excerpts from the beginning of her interview, and those in which she talks about Guta Blass, can be [accessed online](#) along with contextual information.

## **BROWNING, ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES**

### **EXCERPT 3D: WITNESS ACCOUNTS OF A TRANSFER OF PRISONERS**

Finally, Browning analyzes several testimonies given by Guta Blass herself over the course of forty years. Browning also interviewed Blass in 2004. This excerpt summarizes where he sees agreement among the different testimonies. Further in his analysis, he also considers some differences that cannot be reconciled.

“Given the number of concurring accounts, I think that we can conclude beyond any reasonable doubt that Guta Blass attacked the head of the Ukrainian camp guard, Willi Schroth, shortly after the Tartak prisoners arrived at the main camp, was shot in the head at point-blank range, and remarkably survived both this shooting and the expected German retribution. The preponderance of evidence suggests that Baumgarten was the man who made the decision to spare her life. Among the competing explanations—a “miracle,” German respect for her heroism, hiding, and bribery—once again the preponderance of evidence suggests bribery as Baumgarten’s key motive.”

—C. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, 216

## **BROWNING, ARGUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES**

### **EXCERPT 4: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RECOVERING GUTA BLASS'S STORY**

In this excerpt, Browning shares his conclusions about the significance of recovering the story of Guta Blass's experience in the Nazi slave-labor camp in Starachowice.

"If my reconstruction is correct, then this episode has a twofold significance. First, it was a singular act of resistance, in which an unarmed eighteen-year-old woman risked a virtually suicidal attack on the head of the camp guard in order to give her fellow prisoners a last chance to escape but nonetheless survived. Second, on the eve of the evacuation of the camp, every prisoner must have been sorely tempted to husband his or her hidden valuables to increase the chances of survival in the face of a tremendously uncertain future. Instead, in an act of solidarity and collective endeavor, a number of prisoners pooled their resources to purchase the life of a fellow prisoner. The camp system was of course designed not only to divide prisoners but also to pit one against the other in a Darwinian struggle to survive. Numerous survivor accounts confirm the seemingly inexorable logic of the zero-sum game, in which one prisoner's gain would come only at the price of another prisoner's loss. But the cruel logic of the zero-sum game did not always prevail. In this case, Guta Blass attempted to sacrifice herself to save her fellow prisoners. In the end, it was they who sacrificed to save her."

**—C. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, 217**

#### **Vocabulary**

*inexorable*: inescapable.

*to husband*: to conserve.

## Full Citations for Broszat, Browning, and Friedländer

Broszat, Martin. "Concentration Camps 1933-1945." In *Anatomy of the SS State*, edited by Helmut Krausnick et al., translated by Richard Barry, Marian Jackson, and Dorothy Long, 397–504. New York: Walker, 1968.

Browning, Christopher R. "Holocaust History and Survivor Testimony: Challenges, Limitations, and Opportunities." In *Against the Grain: Jewish Intellectuals in Hard Times*, edited by Ezra Mendelsohn, Stefani Hoffman, and Richard I. Cohen, 277–284. New York: Berghahn Books, 2013.

Browning, Christopher R. *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010.

Friedländer, Saul. *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.

### Formatting Note

We use two different ways to indicate that parts of the original text have been omitted in excerpts in this document packet. We use a bracketed ellipsis [ . . . ] if we omitted part of a historian's text in the excerpts. We use an unbracketed ellipsis if the author omitted part of a text they quote in their analysis.