For Terri, Hanka, and Elek

Contents

Foreword

It is 2016 and my mom, Thérèse (Terri) Masson, born Klara Alter, has died. She died on February 15, after suffering a debilitating stroke seven months before. I am heartbroken. My mom was a truly remarkable human being—full of love, life, generosity, and wild optimism. She had a brilliant mind and an enormous heart. Like her mother, my beloved grandmother, she was a survivor. As a young child she survived, as she put it, "The war of all wars [. . .] a persecution that gave rise to the term genocide." She survived, not psychically intact, in fact deeply wounded, but whole enough to become the mother that I knew—a vivacious person, tirelessly carrying on a legacy of love.

My mom was both incredibly constricted by her past and unfathomably free. I cannot explain how this worked. But to know my mom was to know someone who lived seemingly without constraints. She was full of joy and quick to forgive; she didn't care about petty matters and she didn't mind being inconvenienced. She almost always saw the bigger picture, and she could get to the deep truth, the heart of any matter, in an instant, while others languished on the periphery.

With that said, to read this memoir, is to understand my mom as someone who suffered deeply for her entire life from the traumas she suffered as a child. Haunted by nightmares and painful memories, plagued by compulsions and uncontrollable, self-destructive tendencies, she was burdened by a

"cavernous sorrow [. . . that] will continue with me, inhabiting the edge of my consciousness to the end of my days." My mom suffered greatly.

So how to reconcile these two parallel truths? I don't know. My mom is no longer here to ask. She would surely have an answer. What we have is her memoir. Short as it is, unfinished, with a list in capitalized letters on the last page of all that she still wanted to recount, it contains her words, tells her story, and commits to paper the experiences that she carried inside her until the end of her life. And not only does she tell the story of her family's survival as she remembers it, she manages to engage in a kind of self-analysis through which she discovers how these terrible events shaped her character. I am grateful to her for this—for having the courage to tell the story, for these invaluable gifts of memory and insight.

In the pages that follow, my mom tells the story of her survival as a Jewish child in the Warsaw Ghetto, in hiding on the Aryan side, and fleeing east with her mother and father to meet the oncoming Red Army. Two years old at the outbreak of the war, she was eight by the end, so the memories are fragmented, incomplete, but nevertheless vivid and evocative. Interspersed with memories of wartime are reflections from the present and occasional tidbits from her adult life. But the narrative ends abruptly. I know that my mom intended to write more, but after completing a revision in 2008, she did not continue writing.

In order to give some sense of what happened after the manuscript ends, I have included an epilogue comprised of excerpts from a brief biographical timeline she wrote in 2005, around the same time she began working on this memoir. Additionally, with the help of my father, someone with a deep

knowledge of the Holocaust, I have included a timeline of historical events, as well as a glossary of selected terms used in the text. Finally, there is a collection of family photographs, annotated with names and approximate dates. Without being able to consult my mom or grandmother for more precise details, it is the best I could do.

My mom began writing her memoir in 2005 at age sixty-seven following a trip to Warsaw that she and I took together, her first time back to Poland since leaving as a child in 1946. As she remarks, "now at last as an old woman, I am driven to do so [write]." This would be the first of four trips to Warsaw that she and I took together—harrowing journeys, yet deeply rewarding. We went first in 2004, and then returned in 2005, 2006, and finally in 2014 for the opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

On our first trip, we met family we did not know we had, who still lived in Warsaw. And we met a remarkable woman, Elżbieta Janicka, who would become a dear friend, and who broke through the icy Polish silence, the emptiness, the disregard, to help us find some connection to our past, some fragment of hope and truth in the sea of loss that was tossing us about. Over the course of the next two trips, we found the home my mom refers to at the beginning of her story as her family's summer house in Kutno. Sixty years after the events in her memoir, the house was shockingly distinct—just like the image in the photograph. We also obtained my mom's birth certificate, which, despite being fake and issued after the war, felt like a small triumph.

We spent time with our long-lost family and new friend and many hours walking the streets of Warsaw with maps of

the ghetto in our hands and my mom's memories coming to her in flashes—a street name, a number, an image. We spent two mournful afternoons among the stones at Treblinka, and twice we visited the site of the *Umschlagplatz*.[1] These were indescribably difficult and sad occasions.

On our last trip, my mom insisted on going to the opening of the Jewish Museum. Just before the opening night we crossed paths with a young man who worked there. When we explained that my mom had returned to Warsaw for this event at the museum, and that she had survived the Warsaw Ghetto as a child, he told us that we could not attend the reception. The museum could not, he added, be expected to extend invitations to "all the survivors."

My mom writes many times in her memoir that she wishes she had talked more and shared more with her mother and father, that she felt their pain imprinted on her and would have liked to tell them. But my mom was not able to face the pain until her later years, when her parents were already long gone. She writes of her mother: "But through her whole life after these sad times, I could not tell her how I remembered and I could never mourn with her. My failure in this, I so deeply regret."

Now that my mom is also gone, I feel this longing arising in me, a regret, a sense that I did not adequately convey to her the ways that her story, my family's story, lives on inside me. I carry the lament differently. I did not experience these events directly, of course, and time, the passing of generations,

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1 *Umschlagplatz* was the railway yard where Warsaw's Jews were concentrated and then loaded onto cattle trucks going to Treblinka.

weaves these ancestral threads in different ways for each generation. And I do carry the threads, woven around my heart. What happened to my mom, her parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends is also a part of me.

My mother writes: "I wish I could excise it onto a dark canvas that would continue to bear witness when I am gone to dust." Though she never did paint, in these pages she has her canvas, one that allows me, and her new readers, to continue to bear witness now that her memory alone remains. Thank you, Mom, for your enduring love, for living so freely, for your bravery in creating this canvas. May we never forget.

Simone Masson
Oakland, California
May, 2016

Preface

The twentieth century has become known as the era of the witness. Millions of people witnessed in broad daylight the persecution of Jews in Europe and North Africa. Thousands of people, Germans and non-Germans alike, took part in the subsequent genocide resulting in the murder of six million Jewish men, women, and children. Since then, over a period of more than eighty years, more than one hundred thousand Holocaust testimonies have been collected. No other event in history has left behind such a magnitude of eyewitness accounts. Jewish voices constitute the most important body of egodocuments (*ego* is the Latin word for *I*) pertaining to the history of the Holocaust and to the transmission of individual and collective memory. Within the vast, ever-increasing Holocaust literature, Thérèse C. Masson's childhood memoir stands out. *My Kaddish* is a compelling, intriguing testimony.

Let me set the scene by briefly contextualizing and outlining the distinct features of this memoir. Thérèse's recollections are not designed as a historical narrative. Intertwining history and memory, they present and connect early childhood images and episodes with postwar events, reflections, and, above all, the traumatic experiences which shaped her character and life.

Testimonies of Holocaust survivors fulfil many functions. First and foremost, they are responses to Nazi persecution, offering a window into the destruction of Jewish life and

recording the experience of suffering and devastation, resilience and survival. They also create, in Elie Wiesel's words, "invisible tombstones, erected to the memory of the unburied." Murdered Jews were denied resting places in Jewish cemeteries—indeed, in any cemeteries. *My Kaddish* is Thérèse C. Masson's prayer of mourning for her murdered family and the Jewish world that has been destroyed. She restores family ties—a cornerstone of Jewish culture.

Her daughter, Simone, a health professional specializing in the diagnosis of people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease, assisted in writing and editing the memoir. Her ex-husband and close friend, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, a renowned academic and prolific writer, also provided assistance. They inserted a historical timeline and a glossary. They produced a fascinating portrayal of Thérèse and collected a set of photos, which document an intimate circle of family and friends.

Witnesses to the horror of the Holocaust recorded their experiences in successive phases. The first phase in the evolution of the role and image of the Holocaust witness dates back to the war years, to the unfolding "Jewish Catastrophe" or *Churbn*, the Yiddish term common at the time for the destruction of European Jewry. Incarcerated in ghettos and camps or escaping into the underground, Jews wrote down their experiences in pamphlets, diaries, or notebooks, in letters or post cards. Many were murdered; only fragments of their writings have been unearthed.

With their liberation, the second phase began. Wherever survivors were registered—in displaced persons camps (DP camps) or refugee shelters, in Jewish communities or relief organizations—they were asked to tell their stories. Names

and places contained in early questionnaires and protocols aided in the search for missing relatives and friends, a search which continues to this very day. Descendants of survivors relied on these data when tracing their family history.

Like so many testimonies, *My Kaddish* is a "lighthouse" that provides guidance for Holocaust research, education, and remembrance. It fulfils Emil Fackenheim's "614th Commandment"—the obligation to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive. Obliged to remember, the witness, writer, and reader pass on the knowledge and experience of the Holocaust to subsequent generations; and in doing so, they ensure the continuity of Jewish life and deny Adolf Hitler and the executioners of the Final Solution a posthumous victory.

Some thirty thousand testimonies were collected in the immediate postwar period, at a time when memories were still fresh. They challenge the enduring myth of the postwar silence of Holocaust survivors. They graphically reveal the brutality and terror survivors encountered. In their immediacy and rawness, they often give way to aggression and anguish at the recent suffering and loss. They are profoundly different and more significant for the history of the Holocaust than later recollections, which, with the passage of time, are more relevant for studies of the Holocaust's aftermath, as they shed light on the postwar life of survivors.

The third phase commenced when survivors testified in Nazi war crimes trials. Statements and affidavits given to the police and in court rooms played a vital role in tracing and bringing perpetrators to justice. The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem (1961) signaled the emergence of the Holocaust witness as "bearer of history."

The fourth phase began a few years later, with the end of the Cold War and the opening of secret archives in Eastern Europe, which triggered an explosion of Holocaust research and projects. Many survivors and their descendants began to tell their stories, and there was a massive wave of testimonies, recorded by "oral history" programs or in Steven Spielberg's monumental audiovisual project, which captured more than fifty-two thousand voices and faces.[1] These testimonies paved the way for what has been termed "memory work." *My Kaddish* is among such testimonies, as it illustrates how memory works. This phase has made one thing clear: soon there will be no living witnesses to the horror of the Holocaust. The accounts we have are preserved in their original forms in archival depositories across the globe or in publications. A few will be transformed by modern technology and made visually accessible by virtual reconstruction. Child survivors, now at an advanced age, are the last living witnesses of the Holocaust. Thérèse herself wrote her childhood memoirs in the last years of her life.

Born in 1937 in the Polish city of Golub-Dobrzyn, Thérèse Masson, nee Klara Alter, spent her early childhood years behind the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto and in the underground on the "Aryan side," first hidden in a bunker, then in an abandoned farmhouse located in the forest. In 1946, she left Poland with her parents, and embarked on a long journey with stopovers in France, England, and Canada, finally settling down in California. She commenced her professional career

1 See "Film and Video Archive," United States Holocaust Museum, accessed 1 August 2023, https://www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/about/film-and-video-archive.

as a translator and high school history teacher. Later, she made her mark as a writer, presenter, and producer in the worlds of radio, TV, and theatre. As a mature student, she obtained a law degree and practiced as a lawyer and legal consultant. In addition, she was deeply attracted to philosophy and psychoanalysis. Like most survivors, she was haunted by nightmares and painful memories of the terror and trauma she experienced as a child. While two of her marriages ended in divorce, she spent the last thirty-seven years with her partner, Deborah, and daughter, Simone.

It was half a century before Thérèse's silence was broken. Two events provided the decisive impulses. In 2002, Thérèse suffered a brain aneurism that required surgery. The recovery reignited her feeling of being a survivor. In 2004, she travelled to Poland, visiting places from her early childhood which she only vaguely remembered. Upon her return in 2005, and at the age of sixty-seven, she began writing her memoir. The *Spurensuche*, the search for traces of her lost family and early childhood, continued until 2014. The trips to Poland refreshed her memory. Furthermore, relatives were located and new friends made. Thérèse visited a villa in the countryside which, before the war, had been the family's summer house. She walked to locations that were once in the Warsaw Ghetto, looking for the building and backyard which had once confined her. She went to the Umschlagplatz, the collecting point from which the ghetto's inmates were deported to the Treblinka extermination camp. She found her way to Powazki Street and the cemetery where she had spent some time as a child. She returned to where the bunker that was her first hideout after escaping from the ghetto.

My Kaddish depicts the landscapes of her early childhood, transforming them into memorial sites. Visual images and sensory triggers link the past and present: buildings and rooms, walls and backyards, streets and squares, gardens and trees; smells and sounds, light and darkness, warmth and cold, fear and joy, pain and loneliness. These early memories determine the remembrance of events and sentiments. However, they are constantly interrupted by and enmeshed with contemporary episodes and reflections. What finally emerges is a striking self-analysis which not only illustrates how this childhood memoir has been constructed but also reveals the psychological burdens and damage of a child survivor. *My Kaddish* is an important and challenging autobiographical account of the trauma, the wounds, Thérèse experienced as a child during the Holocaust—wounds which never healed and that shaped her postwar life.

Emeritus Professor Dr. Konrad Kwiet
Resident historian, Sydney Jewish Museum
2018

Historical Timeline

January 30, 1933. The Nazi party takes power in Germany. Hitler is elected chancellor.

March 22, 1933. The first Nazi concentration camp is established at Dachau. The initial prisoners are political opponents.

April 7, 1933. The Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service bars Jews from holding positions in the civil service, at universities, and government.

May 10, 1933. Books by Jews and opponents of Nazism are publicly burned.

July 14, 1933. Legislation is adopted that allows for the forced sterilization of Roma and Sinti people, people with disabilities, African Germans, and others considered "inferior to the Aryan race."

September 15, 1935. The anti-Jewish "Nuremberg Laws" are enacted. Jews are no longer considered German citizens, cannot marry Aryans, and are banned from flying the German flag.

March 3, 1936. Jewish doctors are barred from practicing medicine.

July 6, 1938. Representatives from thirty-two countries meet at Evian, France, to discuss refugee policies. Most of the countries refuse to let in more Jewish refugees.

August 17, 1938. Jewish men are forced to take the middle name Israel; Jewish women, the middle name Sarah.

November 9, 1938. Kristallnacht: a nationwide attack on the Jewish population of Germany, including the burning of synagogues, looting of Jewish homes, businesses, and cemeteries, and the murder of Jewish people.

November 12, 1938. All Jewish businesses in Germany closed by decree.

January 30, 1939. In a Reichstag speech, Hitler states that if war erupts, "the result will be not the Bolshevization of earth, and thus a Jewish victory, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

September 1, 1939. Hitler invades Poland.

September 3, 1939. England and France declare war on Germany: World War II has begun.

October, 1939. With Aktion T4, the so-called "euthanasia program," Hitler extends powers to doctors (especially psychiatrists) to kill institutionalized mentally and physically disabled people.

October, 1939. The first Polish ghetto is established in Piotrków.

December, 1939. All Jewish males in Poland between the ages of fourteen and sixty are conscripted for forced labor.

May 20, 1940. The Auschwitz concentration camp is established.

November 15, 1940. The Warsaw Ghetto, containing nearly five hundred thousand Jews, is sealed off.

February 1, 1941. The German authorities begin rounding up Polish Jews for transfer to the Warsaw Ghetto. Ten thousand Jews die from starvation in the ghetto between January and June 1941. An estimated ninety-two thousand people die from starvation in the ghetto before the 1942 mass deportation (Grossaktion Warschau) begins.