

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Concentration, Isolation

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The witness testimonies of Nazi concentration and death camp survivors constitute a body of work that is both suffused with isolation and generative of isolation. This is despite the fact that, ostensibly, the carceral logic implemented in these camps centred around a principle that is precisely the opposite of isolation. ‘Concentration’ means *bringing things together*, not keeping them apart, and this is reflected in sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky’s groundbreaking study of the spatiality of the concentration camp: for Sofsky, it is the institution of the prison that is characterised by isolation, whereas in the camp ‘the principle that holds sway is that of the condensed and segmented mass’ (1997: 52). The camp regime of power generally operated through the massification of bodies in common spaces, not their atomisation across individually demarcated cells: in train carriages, barracks, wash rooms, work sites and courtyards, individuals were crammed together, counted together, surveilled together, and ultimately murdered together in gas chambers whose effectiveness as killing mechanisms depended on the obscene crowding together of human bodies (Netz 2004). And it is the collective nature of camp violence and terror that is emphasised in the iconography of the concentration camp in popular culture, with its focus on the dehumanising assault upon individual identity in the form of shaved heads, tattooed numbers, striped prisoner uniforms and other bodily transformations imposed in order to draw a vicious equivalence between singular lives.

One of the crucial insights that camp testimonies communicate, however, is how the violence of the camps dwelt not only in collective incarceration, enslavement and murder, but fundamentally in the profound isolation that was designed into and emerged from imposed collective formations. Camp testimonies frequently begin with a description of the lengthy train journey that brought deportees to the camp (Gigliotti 2009), and this speaks to the continental isolation that significantly informed Nazi decision-making around the location of

the camps. In particular, the four dedicated extermination camps of Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, and the combined concentration-extermination camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau, were located in Eastern Europe partly out of an overarching plan to radically transform this region into the heart of a new German empire (Barnes and Minca 2013), but also for the more immediate pragmatic aim (among many others) of keeping these sites of genocide secret, from both the Allied forces and the German population (see Wachsmann 2016). Escape from the camp itself, and its borders lined with watchtowers and electrified double barbed wire, was in many cases only the first step into an unfamiliar territory populated with further satellite camps, patrols and manhunts (ibid.). What this basic spatial logic entailed for those groups who were imprisoned in the camps was a deep sense of hopelessness:

If I look at a map today, I see that the distance from Theresienstadt [concentration and transit camp] to Auschwitz is not very great. Yet it was the longest trip I have ever taken. The train stood around, it was summer, the temperature rose. The still air smelled of sweat, urine, excrement. A whiff of panic trembled in the air. It's from this experience that I think I have an idea what it must have been like in the gas chambers. The feeling of having been abandoned, which is not the same as having been forgotten. We knew we hadn't been forgotten [...] (Kluger 2004: 105)

If 'isolation' provides an imaginary for describing the collective situation of those deported to the camp, a self-contained society seemingly set adrift from the world as they had known it, it would be an error to assume that the close proximity of others suffering a common fate necessarily provided comfort or support for the individual. While solidarity and resistance undoubtedly did take on a variety of forms in the camp, the overall concentration camp prisoner body was deliberately striated with social and spatial divisions that were intended to undermine any potential sense of unity among prisoners and stoke competition between groups and individuals for the scarce resources and positions of (relative) safety that were necessary for survival (Carter-White and Minca 2020). In some instances these striations were brutally straightforward: for example, as depicted in Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo's biographical account *None of Us Will Return* (2014), Jewish prisoners were subjected to even more violent conditions and a higher likelihood of selection for the gas chambers than other individuals deemed superior on the hierarchical camp classification of prisoner groups. As such, the 'us' in the title of Delbo's testimony is simultaneously invoked and withdrawn due to the inscription of unequal conditions into the social architecture of the camp. But even aside from this kind of explicit institutional engineering of difference, the extreme deprivation of life in the camp meant that day-to-day survival often depended on the individual finding an advantageous position or resource that others had not, and that could provide protection from the attention of the SS while those unable to do so were subjected to escalating violence. The *I* of the individual was therefore not the only pronoun that the Nazi regime sought to destroy in the camp, since it also constituted an all-out assault on the very notion of the *we*. 'In the concentration camps, there would have been no subject in the first-person plural'

(Lyotard 1988: 97), or as Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi put it ‘here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone’ (2005: 94).

Isolation was layered and compacted upon isolation, as the concentrated groups deported to distant spaces of exception were further divided and fragmented into discrete categories and micro-communities, all the way down to the individual struggling to maintain a millimetre of personal space or strategising how to obtain the scrap of food or clothing that might temporarily sustain their defences and keep them from attracting the glare of the executioner. It would be too optimistic to believe that those who suffered such a relentless and harrowing isolation could simply leave it behind upon the liberation of the camps. A common feature of survivor testimony is that these desolate experiences of concentration and isolation (and the border between the two terms seems increasingly untenable) not only accompanied individuals on their journeys home, but were compounded by the incapacity of ‘everyday’ language to communicate the trauma that survivors had lived through and that continued to course through them and their memories.

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say ‘hunger’, we say ‘tiredness’, ‘fear’, ‘pain’, we say ‘winter’ and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers [camps] had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born. (Levi 2005: 129)

The difficulty of communicating these extreme events and conditions to those who did not experience them means that the act of writing about the camp itself can become a new medium of separation, redefining and redrawing in the present day those lines that concentrated and isolated former prisoners from the outside world. Isolation is, in a sense, integral to witnessing in general – the witness would not be called to testify if another could take their place (Derrida 2000) – but in the context of the camp it takes on a bitter poetic resonance. Yet the isolation of memory was also available to be mobilised by camp inmates, as a protective bulwark – albeit an imperfect one – against the onslaught of concentration:

When I would recite a poem, when I would tell the comrades beside me what a novel or a play was about while we went on digging in the muck of the swamp, it was to keep myself alive, to preserve my memory, to remain me, to make sure of it. Never did that succeed in nullifying the moment I was living through, not for an instant. To think, to remember was a great victory over the horror, but it never lessened it. (Delbo 2001: 2)

We are still far away from exhausting the meaning of isolation, the depths of concentration. It is obvious that reading about the camp is not the same as experiencing it, and that readers are required to take an imaginative and empathetic leap to glean whatever understanding and reflection can be derived from the outside, without delusion as to the limits of such an operation nor foreclosing the different possibilities for ethical response (Marquand 2015). More confronting is the prospect that memories of the camp can be isolated even from the

witness to whom they belong, in whom they are concentrated. The nature of traumatic memories is that they often remain isolated from the volitional recall of survivors, instead announcing themselves unbidden through flashbacks, hallucinations and other involuntary psychological phenomena (Caruth 1991). The oral testimony of Holocaust survivors frequently exemplifies this problematic (Laub and Felman 1992; see also Lanzmann 1985), but the outer reaches of this isolated mental abyss are sometimes legible in written testimony too, in the dense and concentrated significance of inconsistencies, disavowals and contradictions in the text. Such moments can provide meaningful insights into the subjective experiences of individual witnesses (Carter-White 2012), as well as a fleeting glimpse of an enduring and unlocatable cube of loneliness (Hones 2020) that inhabits camp survivors long after their ‘return’ home. But nothing about camp testimony is simple, and while the inaccessibility of traumatic memories might manifest as an affliction, for Delbo the mental isolation of concentration was a *release* that allowed life to continue:

To return from [Auschwitz] was so improbable that it seems to me I was never there at all. [...] And everything that happened to that other, the Auschwitz one, now has no bearing upon me [...]. The Auschwitz double doesn’t bother me, doesn’t interfere with my life. As though it weren’t I at all. Without this split I would not have been able to revive. (Delbo 2001: 3)

Concentration camp testimony pertains to an extreme and disturbing historical and geographical context, necessitating caution in making comparisons and connections beyond that context. But to ignore the broader questions it raises would also do an injustice to the ethical profundity of testimonial works. The dilemma of how to talk about isolation – and moreover, how to hear about the isolation of another, without subsuming it into collective frames that concentrate it, strain it and void it of meaning and specificity – is an inherent concern of camp survivor testimony, yet it could hardly be more relevant to the present moment.

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