

Anja Ballis

# The media network of memory: Sharing Holocaust stories on TikTok and collaborative writing of “memory books”

## 1 The media network of memory – Lily Ebert and Gidon Lev

For many years Holocaust survivors have played an important role in Holocaust education and have extensively shaped the culture of remembrance, especially in Europe, Israel and the US. They have visited school classes, museums and other institutions to talk about their experiences before, during and after the Holocaust. The frequent invitations that survivors have received to various institutions have shaped the way they give testimony and ensured that the experience is meaningful and trustworthy.<sup>1</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic we observed a tendency towards online remembrance on social media.<sup>2</sup> Since many institutions were closed, some survivors began telling their stories on social media, especially on TikTok, often supported by family members. The eyewitnesses give insights into their lives, answer questions from platform participants, advertise their books and comment on their stories and public affairs. They often receive support from younger family members in using the online technology. In this manner, they have achieved agency in telling their story on their own, no longer being dependent on institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Two Holocaust survivors, Lily Ebert and Gidon Lev, have become quite popular “online survivors”. Lily Ebert, born in 1923, is a Holocaust survivor who was deported from Hungary in the summer of 1944 to Auschwitz. After four months, she and her two other sisters were sent to forced labor in a munitions factory

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1 Aaron Beim and Gary Alan Fine, “Trust in testimony: The institutional embeddedness of Holocaust survivor narratives,” *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 48(1) (2007): 55–75.

2 Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, “Commemorating from a distance: the digital transformation of Holocaust memory in times of COVID-19,” *Media, Culture & Society* 43(6) (2021): 1095–1112.

3 Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Tom Divon, “Serious TikTok: Can you learn about the Holocaust in 60 seconds?,” *Digital Holocaust Memory Blog*, accessed 16 May 2023, <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/digitalholocaustmemory/2022/03/24/can-you-learn-about-the-holocaust-in-60-seconds-on-tiktok/>.

near Leipzig, where she was liberated by US troops. After the war, she migrated to Israel; due to family circumstances, she eventually moved to England in 1967, where she still lives today. After the death of her husband in 1988, she began to work with Holocaust survivors, recounting her story and speaking about her experiences at schools and museums. During the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, she used social media as a substitute for sharing her story, with the help of her great-grandson Dov. In February 2021, he set up a TikTok account to tell her story and to raise awareness about the Holocaust. In addition, they published a book about her life, *Lily's Promise. How I Survived Auschwitz and Found the Strength to Live*.<sup>4</sup> Lily and Dov interweave Lily's memories of her experiences with storytelling, with social media as an integral part of the narrative structure.

Gidon Lev, born in 1935, is a Holocaust survivor who was deported from Czechoslovakia to the camp of Terezín in 1941; in May 1945 he was liberated by the Soviet Army. His mother Doris also survived, and they emigrated together to the US and later to Canada. In 1959, Lev went to Israel where he still lives today. He was married twice, served in the Israeli Defense Force during the Six-Day-War and worked in several different fields. In July 2021, Gidon Lev, together with his life partner Julie Gray, opened an account on TikTok, in order to promote the publication of his biography *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev*.<sup>5</sup> On the platform they were able to promote the book and raise money for its publication. Over time their focus broadened, and other issues, especially the fight against antisemitism, became important to them.

For the study presented here, I consult the recollections of the two Holocaust survivors Lily Ebert and Gidon Lev. Their activities show similarities and differences that reveal how memory is shaped and multiplied in times of digitality. Of particular interest is the media network of memory, consisting of media coverage, social media activities and printed memoirs. By comparing their media network of memory, we shed light on the process of creating and constructing memory, which has become an influential voice in Holocaust education. In a first step, I will analyze Lily Ebert's and Gidon Lev's motivation for using TikTok and its specific narrative structures of storytelling. Of special interest is the social practice of sharing, which implies a certain set of relational outcomes, for example, options

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<sup>4</sup> Lily Ebert and Dov Forman, *Lily's Promise: How I Survived Auschwitz and Found the Strength to Live* (London: MacMillian, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Julie Gray and Gidon Lev, *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev* (Ramat-Gan: In-House-Publishing, 2020).

to align with other tellers, and to create, maintain or threaten rapport.<sup>6</sup> Closely connected with sharing is the second step of my analysis: The testimony of both survivors on social media is intertwined with providing a narrative of their life by writing a “memory book” in collaboration with family members.<sup>7</sup> The extent to which print media and its structure influence online storytelling – and vice versa – is discussed in the third section. Thus, my study contributes to considerations on shaping memory by different agents and on taking action against forgetting the crimes of the Holocaust.

## 2 Motivation for using TikTok – answers from Lily Ebert and Gidon Lev

### 2.1 The specifics of the TikTok platform

My first encounter with Lily Ebert and her great-grandson Dov was during the COVID-19 pandemic. I read an article in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, where I learned about their activities on social media.<sup>8</sup> This was a fascinating discovery and I did further background research on Lily Ebert and Dov Forman. In the process, I came across other Holocaust survivors who are active on TikTok. Gidon Lev in particular stood out, receiving a great deal of German media coverage. Gidon Lev was portrayed as well in *Der Spiegel*, where his activities against anti-semitism are highlighted.<sup>9</sup>

Media reports above all emphasise TikTok as a leading social media platform, one dedicated to youth culture, especially generation Z.<sup>10</sup> If Holocaust survivors in their nineties get involved with this platform, media point out the following contrasts and opposites: Young meets old, present meets history, dance/entertainment meets education. It also becomes interesting to ask whether the popular

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6 Ruth Page, *Narratives online: Shared stories in social media* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

7 Sabrina Semmelroth, *Co-Autorschaft und Ghostwriting in der Holocaustliteratur. Exemplarische Analysen zu einer kontroversen Beziehung* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2019).

8 Spiegel online, „Uroma mit Millionen Followern,“ accessed 16 May 2023, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/ur-oma-mit-millionen-followern-a-4656305b-50ab-40f8-aebf-3dd92df516c0>.

9 Spiegel online, „Holocaust-Überlebender kämpft auf TikTok gegen Online-Hass,“ accessed 16 May 2023, <https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/web/holocaust-ueberlebender-kaempft-auf-tiktok-gegen-online-hass-mein-impuls-ist-zurueckschlagen-a-e073c489-3eaa-4d81-a1e2-846f5068bb31>.

10 Klaus Hurrelmann and Erik Albrecht, *Gen Z. Between Climate Crisis and Coronavirus Pandemic* (London: Routledge, 2021), 66.

and fast growing TikTok can be a suitable platform for such important topics as Holocaust testimonies.

Currently, TikTok (in Chinese: Douyin; formerly known as musical.ly) is one of the most successful Chinese social media applications in the world. Since its inception in September 2016, the mobile app has seen widespread acceptance, encouraging in particular young users to view, create and comment on “LipSync videos”. TikTok is the fastest growing social media platform in the world, with its free app already downloaded more than 175 million times since the start of 2022. For the past nine quarters, TikTok has surpassed 10 million downloads; “No app has had more downloads than TikTok since the beginning of 2018 when WhatsApp had 250 million worldwide downloads, per the report”.<sup>11</sup>

TikTok is based on users’ content, which they create and publish as short clips (30 seconds and five minutes). Photo filters, augmented reality applications and the use of playful elements are added to the clips, which can be underpinned with popular (chart) music from an extensive library within TikTok. In addition, the audio tracks of all uploaded user videos can be accessed.<sup>12</sup>

TikTok functions in such a way as to motivate users to explore new possibilities for creating videos. Clips often become popular when audio pieces and video are combined in a special manner. The starting point of a “trend” is often a so-called “challenge” to encourage users to implement a specific script for a clip in an individual way, for example a (shared) dance, answering personal questions, or performing an “embarrassing” act in public. By combining existing visual and audio elements, a wealth of content is formed that can be understood as a remix of elements<sup>13</sup> – one of the dominant aesthetic practices of contemporary media culture.

On TikTok the content created and published is played out on the user’s individual “For You Page”. This page is central to the success of the platform; it makes follower count less important to reach an audience than in traditional social

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11 Techcrunch, “TikTok was the top app by worldwide downloads in Q1 2022,” accessed 16 May 2023, [https://techcrunch.com/2022/04/26/tiktok-was-the-top-app-by-worldwide-downloads-in-q1-2022/?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmF0Lw&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAG70qlel3P4xmqtFqBRbH2rwsg\\_MGsBPQu6M4mv3yi7mtVEIYOa3R7SC9sBWpyvMfw4ObgEZ8tEz74sigRWcmgGEm0aKvjUczMhRu9sCBYmjuxp9fTzQN8T27xtP2tW2khn4rubvhOpb6uAwAX5jd8a\\_w9SZPgSVZocsGIDGLapb#](https://techcrunch.com/2022/04/26/tiktok-was-the-top-app-by-worldwide-downloads-in-q1-2022/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmF0Lw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAG70qlel3P4xmqtFqBRbH2rwsg_MGsBPQu6M4mv3yi7mtVEIYOa3R7SC9sBWpyvMfw4ObgEZ8tEz74sigRWcmgGEm0aKvjUczMhRu9sCBYmjuxp9fTzQN8T27xtP2tW2khn4rubvhOpb6uAwAX5jd8a_w9SZPgSVZocsGIDGLapb#).

12 Hans-Christian Gräfe and Jonas Kunze, “Medienintermediär TikTok: UGC-Clips als Herausforderungen für das Urheberrecht,” in *Tipping Points*, ed. Simon Schrör, Georg Fischer, Sophie Beaucamp, and Konstantin Hondros (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2020), 59.

13 Gräfe and Kunze, “Medienintermediär TikTok,” 59–60.

media.<sup>14</sup> Users do not follow other users, although they can; in general, content is presented by means of an algorithm which enables participants to like, comment and share videos. TikTok also has a “duet” function: another video is created in light of an existing clip and published online so that the videos are connected with each other; using the “stitch” function, content of the one video is remixed with new content.<sup>15</sup>

Platforms are gradually infiltrating in, and converging with, the (offline, legacy) institutions and practices through which societies are organised. Therefore, van Dijck et al. argue for the term “platform society” to emphasise the inextricable relation between online platforms and societal structures.<sup>16</sup> The “platform society” does not merely shift the focus from the economic to the social; the term also refers to a dispute about private gain versus public benefit in a society. It is important to notice that platforms are neither neutral nor value-free constructs; instead, specific norms and values shape and organise their architectures. These norms may or may not clash with values engraved in the societal structures and their history in which platforms are implemented.<sup>17</sup>

Concerning Holocaust testimony, we find a variety of platforms which have been developed by institutions and organisations for archiving the stories. Additionally, Facebook and Wikipedia have become central instruments of mediating knowledge and shaping Holocaust memory.<sup>18</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, museums and memorials began exploring social media platforms<sup>19</sup> so that we find connections between different digital activities of the institutions.

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14 Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Historical Analogies and Historical Consciousness: User-Generated History Lessons on TikTok,” in *History Education in the Digital Age*, ed. Mario Carretero, Maria Cantabrana, and Cristian Parellada (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 48.

15 Marcus Bösch and Chris Köver, *Schluss mit lustig? TikTok als Plattform für politische Kommunikation* (Berlin: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2021).

16 Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, *The mediated construction of reality* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

17 José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

18 Eva Pfanzelter, “Performing the Holocaust on social networks-Digitality, transcultural memory and new forms of narrating,” *Kultura Popularna* 51(1) (2017): 136–151.

19 Martin Rehm and Stefania Manca, “Three Institutions, Three Platforms, One Goal: Social Media for Holocaust Memory,” in *ECSM 2021 8th European Conference on Social Media*, ed. Christos Karpasitis (Reading: Academic Conferences International Limited, 2021), 195–204; Ebbrecht-Hartmann, “Commemorating from a distance”; Berlin Ramer Institut, “Press release: Presentation of ‘TikTok – Shoah Education and Commemoration Initiative’,” accessed 16 May 2023, <https://ajcggermany.org/en/comment/press-release-presentation-tiktok-shoah-education-and-commemoration-initiative>.

Regarding content, TikTok presents – on the one hand – joy, escapism, education and community-building ideas; on the other hand, we find disrespectful content reinforcing racism, classism, distortion and denial of the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup> It must be critically noted that compared to other platforms, TikTok can spread content with hate quickly because of its architecture. Utilising the platform's trends and aesthetics, users “memeify” antisemitism; further, the TikTok's algorithmic repression tends to block JewToks' (#JewishTikTok community) responses to antisemitic content.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2 Motivations for sharing stories on TikTok

The two Holocaust survivors Lily Ebert and Gidon Lev have different motivations for using TikTok. In a variety of media articles, Lily Ebert and her great-grandson stress that they use the platform mainly for educational purposes – to conduct “mini-lessons” about the Holocaust.<sup>22</sup> In an interview published on the platform TikTok in 2021, Lily and Dov elaborate on that topic. Dov, born in 2003,<sup>23</sup> emphasises specific possibilities for innovative teaching on the platform: “As we enter the next generation of Holocaust education, social media will provide the platform to educate about the Holocaust and subsequent genocides”.<sup>24</sup> Lily appreciates Dov's efforts; she stresses that she has learned a lot from him. For her it is important to reach out to many users: “I could never have dreamt that we could reach as many people as we do on social media”.<sup>25</sup> When asked what their goal is on TikTok, they both respond in one voice: “Our goal on TikTok is to teach people about the Holocaust but also about how we can only have peace with tolerance and understanding. We also want to spread messages of love and positivity and about how even if you have the worst trauma in life, things can always get better”.<sup>26</sup>

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20 Trevor Boffone, “Introduction to ‘The Rise of TikTok in US Culture’,” in *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, ed. Trevor Boffone (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2022), 6.

21 Tom Divon and Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, “#JewishTikTok: The JewToks' Fight against Antisemitism,” in *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, ed. Trevor Boffone (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2022), 47.

22 Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Divon, “Serious TikTok.”

23 Wikipedia, “Dov Forman,” accessed 16 May 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dov\\_Forman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dov_Forman).

24 Newsroom TikTok, “TikTok Creator Spotlight: @Lilyebert,” accessed 16 May 2023, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-gb/tiktok-creator-spotlight-lilyebert>.

25 Newsroom TikTok, “TikTok Creator Spotlight: @Lilyebert.”

26 Newsroom TikTok, “TikTok Creator Spotlight: @Lilyebert.”

Dov is convinced that social media has a powerful voice, something which became obvious during the lockdown. In the jointly authored book *Lily's Promise*, published in 2021, he reflects on how social media has been connected with Lily's story. In July 2020, his great-grandmother beseeched him: "Let's do something, Dov!"<sup>27</sup> During the pandemic Lily Ebert was missing the meetings and encounters with people. Dov writes: "She always thrived on meeting new people. As a living witness, Lily cherishes her role in Holocaust education".<sup>28</sup> Since the young man had started a Twitter feed in 2020, he was able to share Lily's story on that platform: "Now I'm thinking more seriously about using social media to introduce Safta and her story to new audiences".<sup>29</sup> In the first chapter of *Lily's Promise*, written by Dov, we learn how Lily was persuaded to do this project. One day they were looking at Lily's photo album together and she showed Dov a banknote, previously unknown to him; it was given to her by a Jewish US soldier after her liberation and shortly before she left for Switzerland in 1946. Written on the note is "A start to a new life. Good luck and happiness" and the signature "assistant to Chaplin Schacter". Dov, who had not yet seen this banknote, wanted to find the unknown person for Lily: "I'll find him for you, I promise. I'll post it on Twitter. I bet someone out there will be able to track him down".<sup>30</sup> This is the ending of the first chapter of the book; on the next 160 pages Lily tells the story of her childhood in Hungary, persecution and deportation to Auschwitz, liberation in 1945, recovery in Switzerland and her decision to leave for Palestine.<sup>31</sup> Her story is embedded in Dov's narration of bringing together social media and testimony by sharing memory on platforms. The third part of the book, written by Dov, continues to tell us about the success of Dov's feed on Twitter. Within 24 hours they found out who the US soldier was and were able to meet on Zoom with his ancestors. Further, Dov connected with other institutions – archives and museums – and collected more facts about Lily's history. Although he mentions antisemitic statements showing up on his Twitter account as well,<sup>32</sup> he stresses the potential of social media: "I thought social media would help people understand what she had to go through, just for being Jewish. Short clips might draw them in to longer interviews".<sup>33</sup> In the last part of the book, which follows Lily's narration of her

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27 Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 5.

28 Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 5.

29 Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 6.

30 Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 11.

31 Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 168.

32 Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri, "TikTok's Spiral of Antisemitism," *Journalism and Media* 2 (2021): 701, 703.

33 Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 178.

life between 1946 and 2020, Dov comments on their successful TikTok account and its power for finding new ways to speak to his generation: “You’ve got to be creative to engage new audiences”.<sup>34</sup> He tends to use platforms in a “testimony mode” to present videos in which Holocaust survivors share their stories.<sup>35</sup> Being a member of Gen Z, he is – like 37.3 million Gen Z users – familiar with this platform.<sup>36</sup>

Gidon Lev and Julie Gray chose the path to TikTok for other reasons. In an interview, Gidon Lev’s life partner, editor and author Julie Gray explains the reasons. Mainly, they wanted to promote the new book *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev* (2020) that they co-wrote and through which they got to know each other. Julie Gray points out:

I read an article in the Wall Street Journal, and it was like, “Author Goes Big on TikTok.” [. . .] So it came out during the pandemic, we hadn’t been able to really promote our book, and we look at TikTok. So we made, like, one TikTok: Here’s Gidon Lev, he’s a Holocaust survivor, you should read his book. And then we made two or three like that. And people liked it. Suddenly people start commenting [. . .].<sup>37</sup>

Even though it is Gidon’s story, he stresses that his life partner Julie is “the brains, the creator, the innovator behind it”.

Referring to the modes established by Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Divon,<sup>38</sup> we can add an “advertising mode” in which videos of Holocaust survivors promote their testimony books and other media. The TikTok account is called *thetrueadventures*, which is also the title of the book and the related podcast. This name serves as a marker for the media activities connected with Gidon Lev’s testimony.

Soon after starting their TikTok account, Julie und Gidon realised that some people on the platform had their own “interpretations” of the Holocaust. They received comments that compared COVID to the Holocaust. Julie, in her fifties, points out: “That’s what made us go viral because we started seeing – yes, we see some antisemitism on our account – but we started seeing people on TikTok comparing having to wear a star to COVID”.<sup>39</sup> In particular, they addressed Joe Rogan, a famous US stand-up comedian who compared COVID restrictions to the Holo-

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<sup>34</sup> Ebert and Forman, *Lily’s Promise*, 297.

<sup>35</sup> Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Divon, “Serious TikTok.”

<sup>36</sup> Weimann and Masri, “TikTok’s Spiral of Antisemitism,” 698.

<sup>37</sup> The Times of Israel, “A Holocaust survivor fought antisemitism on TikTok and now he’s a social media star,” accessed 16 May 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-holocaust-survivor-fought-antisemitism-on-tiktok-and-now-hes-a-social-media-star/>.

<sup>38</sup> Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Divon, “Serious TikTok.”

<sup>39</sup> The Times of Israel, “A Holocaust survivor.”

caust. This raised media interest; Gray describes what happened next: “And that infuriated both of us. So we made a TikTok about Joe Rogan, directly took him on. And that’s when we got on Newsweek, and the Daily Mail in England – the media picked us up because we took on Joe Rogan and we asked him to apologize”.<sup>40</sup>

Increasingly, Julie and Gidon responded to the inappropriate comparisons of the Holocaust to the pandemic, summarised as “responsive mode”.<sup>41</sup> In this way, they dedicated themselves to Holocaust education and the fight against antisemitism. In addition, Gidon Lev mentions a very personal reason why this platform is appropriate for him. Since music and dance are an integral part of TikTok, Gidon uses it to perform: “It’s a different way of communicating. And it turns out I enjoy actually acting. I’m a dancer – well, a folk dancer”.<sup>42</sup>

Reflecting on the motivations of both Holocaust survivors to join TikTok, we find an autodidactic, intuitive, and user-centered way of story-telling. Their accounts on the platform represent a form of memory-engagement that undermines traditional “top-down” models of collective memory.<sup>43</sup> Family members have the agency to provide content and share information on and insights into the Holocaust survivors’ lives: Dov moderates Lily’s storyline on TikTok in an educational and testimonial mode; Julie stresses the role of education as well and is very active in responding to Holocaust denial and distortion. They are united in the social practice of sharing. In her reflections, Page considers “sharing” to be central for stories told on social media. She references “small stories” that focus on non-canonical and atypical situations and are found in everyday communication, often on social media. These platforms provide glimpses into everyday life, while at the same time restricting users – often by limiting the number of characters – from diving into full autobiographical mode. Users share experiences that they update as often as necessary and embed in different social platforms.<sup>44</sup> Taking up this idea, Page defines “shared story as a retelling, produced by many tellers, across iterative textual segments, which promotes shared attitudes between its tellers”.<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, “sharing” can be established on different levels: In a first step, clips of the Holocaust survivors, often in an everyday surrounding, are released on the platform.

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40 The Times of Israel, “A Holocaust survivor.”

41 Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Divon, “Serious TikTok.”

42 The Times of Israel, “A Holocaust survivor.”

43 Nurit Novis-Deutsch, Shmuel Lederman, Tracy Adams, and Arie J. Kochavi, *Sites of Tension: Shifts in Holocaust memory in Relation to Antisemitism and Political Contestation in Europe* (Haifa: The Weiss-Livnat International Center for Holocaust Research and Education, 2023), 14.

44 Alexandra Georgakopoulou, “Small Stories Research. Methods – Analysis – Outreach,” in *The Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, ed. Anna de Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 257, 266.

45 Page, *Narratives online*, 197.

Sometimes Dov and Julie tell new stories, sometimes they remix the content already published and connected with other media.<sup>46</sup> In a second step, users react to the clips with emojis, likes, images, and other tools that are available on TikTok. Such action by the community in turn influences what is told and has to be considered an integral part of the stories. On the one hand, we observe how users are affected by the narrative when posting related duets or comments. On the other hand, the content can also be put into a different, antisemitic and misanthropic context. Both activities were noticed by Dov and Julie; they reacted in different ways to the comments, which in turn influences the narrative of Holocaust survivors on TikTok. And finally, “sharing” is understood as negotiating shared values and sociocultural conditions that are inscribed in the story.<sup>47</sup> Lily and Dov as well as Gidon and Julie are bonding with users in a community who commit themselves to “Never Forget!” and “Remember!” to make the world a better place – despite hate, denial and distortion online.

### 3 Writing memory books with family members

In Holocaust literature, which deals with the setting down of survivors’ memories, co-authorship has been a topic for several years. Recently, the persons who support the writing of biographies have been coming more to the fore. They are no longer “hidden” as ghostwriters. Rather, they become visible persons whose names appear on the book covers.<sup>48</sup> Semmelroth argues for a “structure of actants” involved in the writing of lived history. Moreover, she points to the role of these co-authors for the survivor’s story: they contextualise the biographical notes and substantiate the facts as historians; additionally, they take on the role of therapists who listen to survivors’ traumatic stories and support them. They are also affected emotionally.<sup>49</sup>

Both books – *Lily’s Promise* and *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev* – feature co-authors whose roles will be examined in more detail. Dov Forman is introduced in *Lily’s Promise* as her co-author, while in *The True Adventures* Gidon Lev takes on this role. The texts are united by a structure connected to the process of constructing and framing memories.

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<sup>46</sup> Felix Stalder, *Kultur der Digitalität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019), 97.

<sup>47</sup> Page, *Narratives online*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Semmelroth, *Co-Autorschaft und Ghostwriting*, 444.

<sup>49</sup> Semmelroth, *Co-Autorschaft und Ghostwriting*, 445.

### 3.1 Under construction – Gen Z meets memory

*Lily's Promise* is clearly structured: The book consists of five parts, in which Dov and Lily take turns narrating. It is made clear to the readers at the beginning of each chapter who the first-person narrator is. Moreover, the content is structured by time period. Dov narrates three parts of the book, forming the frame in which Lily's life story – separated into two parts – is integrated.

The first chapter with Dov as first-person narrator starts in North London on 3 July 2020. He introduces the reader to his great-grandmother and to himself. He writes that he became involved in her biography during the COVID-19 pandemic. As already mentioned, Dov brings social media to Lily and connects her story with the platform Twitter to find “missing pieces” of her memory. In the second part, two days later on 5 July 2020, Dov continues the story by describing his research on Lily's biography, consulting well-known institutions, for example the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum (USHMM); the last part of the book takes place on 29 December 2020, Lily's 97th birthday. In this chapter readers learn how Dov communicates with Lily to arrange social media posts on Twitter and TikTok:

I phone Lily to find out what she'd like me to tweet for her birthday. “I never expected to survive Auschwitz and start a family,” she tells me. “Now I celebrate with ten grandchildren and 34 great-grandchildren.” I write this in a post, and add a beautiful picture of Lily, and photos of her many descendants. Almost immediately, my timeline begins to fill with message of love and congratulations. I can't wait to share them with Safta.<sup>50</sup>

Dov describes how he – as a great-grandchild and member of Gen Z – uses social media to engage a younger audience with Lily's story and her life. In his parts of the book, he gives insights into his perspective as an adolescent constructing “testimony feeds” on social media. These “testimony feeds” are authenticated by his role as a family member, bringing trustworthy first-hand knowledge to a wider public; additionally, he reveals how he has acquired additional knowledge from institutions about Lily's story, which further strengthens the credibility of his statements.<sup>51</sup> Finally, Lily praises Dov, calling him her “promise keeper”: “Dov will go on telling the world. He will keep my promise too”.<sup>52</sup>

After telling about her life before and during the Holocaust in the first part of the book, Lily elaborates on the time period after the Holocaust in the second

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<sup>50</sup> Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 297.

<sup>51</sup> Eva Mona Altmann, *Das Unsagbare verschweigen. Holocaust-Literatur aus Täterperspektive. Eine interdisziplinäre Textanalyse* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2021), 226.

<sup>52</sup> Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 292.

part. Here she reflects on her role of becoming an eyewitness of the Holocaust in the 1990s, on the process of writing a transcript of her memories, and her first public lectures on her life during the Holocaust. In addition to this official role, for which she was awarded the British Empire Medal, she also reports on her family's struggle with her story: Her children did not want to ask about her tattoo so as not to upset her; they accessed this part of the history themselves and travelled to Auschwitz without their mother. Lily admits: "The truth is, I've always found it easier to answer the questions of strangers, to talk to large groups in public, than to discuss my past with my own family, at home".<sup>53</sup>

It took her a while to open up to members of her family as well. Sixteen-year-old Dov came just at the right moment. According to Lily, she is now able to give answers, being aware of the little time left: "Now I feel prepared to cast my mind back and try to recover anything my great-grandchildren want to know about my life. 'Ask me anything!', I tell him".<sup>54</sup>

### 3.2 Writing and quoting – organising memory at last

Trust in family members is central when Holocaust survivors collaborate in writing memory books. The family co-authorship also opens up to focus on the constructive character of memory, to which various people and institutions contribute. A characteristic of these texts is that they reveal and document the process of forming memories by writing together. This is also central to the volume dedicated to Gidon Lev's life. In his case, too, a relationship of trust and affection are linked to writing a survivor's story. Julie, his life partner, states: "The book became more than the story of one man; it became the tale of two people telling an important story in times that desperately needed perspective and hope".<sup>55</sup>

In the preface and first chapter, Julie Gray describes her authorship. In 2012, she emigrated from the US to Israel. Previously, she had lived and worked in Hollywood for ten years as a story analyst and editor for novels and film scripts. In Israel she met Gidon Lev, who was looking for an editor to help write his biography. Gidon had already collected documents and written notes and a manuscript. She could not resist taking on this project because she felt a sense of responsibility to form a Holocaust survivor's narrative: "[Gidon] realized that his memories were not, in themselves, a narrative. The historical and cultural background of

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<sup>53</sup> Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 287.

<sup>54</sup> Ebert and Forman, *Lily's Promise*, 291.

<sup>55</sup> Gray and Lev, *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev*, XII.

his life had been complicated. He needed someone to join him in his project”.<sup>56</sup> First of all, they organised Gidon’s collection of notes and documents with the help of volunteers who were contacted via Facebook. With their support, handwritten pages were grouped together and typed. Next, Gidon and Julie worked out a modus operandi for writing down Gidon’s story: Julie would present a draft which Gidon could comment on once a week: “Finally, we agreed that we would go over every chapter together, weekly, and that Gidon’s notes and comments would focus on those matters of great importance – not just facts, dates, and the like, but his feeling. [. . .] His comments (or lack of them) offered a valuable insight not just into Gidon but into the nature of memory itself”.<sup>57</sup>

In Julie Gray, Gidon Lev has a professional writer at his side who organises the workflow. Moreover, she chooses a specific form for the book that always makes it clear who is narrating and where the narrator is. A structural feature of this book is that the time levels are consistently intertwined: When Gidon tells of his birth and childhood in the Czechoslovakia and particularly in Prague, it is linked with a journey that Julie and Gidon took to these places. Travelling to sites of Gidon’s life and exploring his everyday life in Israel connects the different time axes. Gidon’s memories in the first person are always set in quotes and are thus visually recognisable. Although the work describes the survivor’s life chronologically, events in the past are repeatedly interrupted by present experiences of the author and his co-author. In addition, Julie, who immigrated to Israel from the US, is able to ask many questions about the situation of Holocaust survivors in Israel. In this way, she takes on an outside perspective and builds a bridge to readers unfamiliar with the Israeli way of life.

Living, writing, and remembering is a process in which Julie and Gidon share equally. Moreover, Gidon’s memories are also constantly challenged, which nevertheless strengthens the trustworthiness of his report. How painful this process is for him is elaborated in the chapter titled “Mother”. Repeatedly, Gidon Lev expresses regret about his poor relationship with his mother Doris. When working with Julie on the book, he showed her a binder called *My Mother* with photographs, documents, notes and twelve handwritten pages entitled *Konzentrationscamp Years 1941–1945* written by his mother. Gidon stresses that he has never seen those documents before, “yet he is a keeper of records”, writes Julie. Julie addresses some questions which may occur to readers as well: “Had he truly never seen this? Or was his memory playing selective tricks on his mind?” The document causes further troubles: Gidon doesn’t believe the report; he argues about whether his father

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<sup>56</sup> Gray and Lev, *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev*, 4–5.

<sup>57</sup> Gray and Lev, *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev*, 8.

and grandfather were in the same transport to Terezín – as his mother wrote in her notes. Gidon is – according to Julie – not willing to believe his mother’s version; he is of the opinion that his grandfather was not with them: “‘If my grandfather was *with* us, he could have helped me carry my bag!’ Gidon sputtered, his face reddening with emotion”.<sup>58</sup> Julie writes about Gidon’s emotional flashback and his struggle with his memories: “Gidon was more than affronted, he was triggered. Doris’s accounts contradicted his own memories”.<sup>59</sup>

According to Julie, Gidon agreed months later to include these passages in the book. Between the discussion of the documents and his agreement, Julie describes another private and emotional moment in which readers come close to the Holocaust survivor: He is standing at the Mediterranean, looking into the distance, and wishing he could think more kindly of his mother.<sup>60</sup>

In *Lily’s Promise* and *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev*, the (co-)authors Dov Forman and Julie Gray serve as memory keepers to Holocaust survivors’ everyday and public life;<sup>61</sup> since veracity and ethics are particularly sensitive issues with Holocaust books as artefacts of living memory,<sup>62</sup> both (co-)authors reveal the process of creating the book and their part in it. Because of their affection for the survivors, who trust them, they are able to ask questions which other generations or people from the outside might not dare to address. The process of re-constructing a narrative and contextualising it with social media or with sites of personal history become specific elements of the narrations. Private life, becoming and being an eyewitness, exploring memories as well as integrating the perspectives of co-authors, establishes a new generation of memory books; these books enrich the traditional canon of Holocaust literature<sup>63</sup> providing an exclusive perspective and reaching out to other media.

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58 Gray and Lev, *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev*, 254.

59 Gray and Lev, *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev*, 255.

60 Gray and Lev, *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev*, 256.

61 Stephen D. Smith, *The Trajectory of Holocaust Memory: The Crisis of Testimony in Theory and Practice* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2023), 12.

62 Claire Parnell and Beth Driscoll, “Institutions, platforms and the production of debut success in contemporary book culture,” *Media International Australia* 187(1) (2021): 123–138.

63 Jenni Adams, “New Directions in Holocaust Literary Studies,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, ed. Jenni Adams (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 237.

## 4 All about media network of memory – platforms, books and individuals

The two case studies focusing on Lily Ebert and Gidon Lev demonstrate a shift in agency: “grassroots” memories contribute to and/or substitute for “national” and “global” memories.<sup>64</sup> Private agents, such as family members, replace the scope of the official, public, state sanctioned forms of remembrance: Great-grandsons and life partners moderate testimonies of Holocaust survivors on their own, oscillating between intuitive autodidactic and professional competences. They represent a tradition of dynamic memory with reformatting, recycling, returning and remembering other media.<sup>65</sup> They are interested in reaching an audience on different media channels to tell the survivors’ stories. Their actions are bundled in a media network of memory where digital technology and analog media are intertwined – and not regarded as opposites. The metaphor of the network, which is of course not new in times of digitisation, comprises all sorts of memory media and actants involved in constructing and creating them. Thus, a dynamic experience is offered to an audience, one which is satisfying because it brings us closer to Holocaust survivors.<sup>66</sup> The new actants of memory serve as catalysts for sharing private aspects as well as historical experiences: In the media we find information on how narrations of survivors are created and used; these reports contribute to making the activities on social media better known. On TikTok, messages, important stations in survivors’ lives and everyday situations are processed in a few seconds. Testimonial and educational modes go hand in hand with advertising other media of remembrance; and it has to be highlighted, that Gidon Lev and Julie Gray stand up explicitly against antisemitism. In the analyzed memory books, the process of telling a life story can be explored in more detail. Co-authorship has a self-understood function and ensures a multi-perspective and reader-oriented narrative that sets the tone for the sentiments “Never Again!”, “Never forget!” and “Fight antisemitism!”

A new memory practice “relationing the Holocaust” is established. This practice aims to make the Holocaust relevant and connected to people’s lives and

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64 Rebecca Kook, “Agents of memory in the post-witness era: Memory in the living room and changing forms of Holocaust remembrance in Israel,” *Memory Studies* 14(5) (2021): 983.

65 Matthew Boswell and Antony Rowland, *Virtual Holocaust Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 207.

66 Tomasz Łysak, “Vlogging Auschwitz: new players in Holocaust commemoration,” *Holocaust Studies* 28(3) (2022): 377–402.

serves several psychological processes.<sup>67</sup> Referring to the media network of Lily and Dov as well as Gidon and Julie, we find an extra-participatory approach bringing together media producers and consumers shaped by cultural and social protocols. Individuals are already actants of memory and social change;<sup>68</sup> they establish in writing, reading, clicking, liking, commenting a “practice of sharing”. Content is split into different media, users’ receptions are valued and co-authors pave the way to new audiences. Individuals – users, readers, viewers, co-authors – are united in the process of the co-production of and participation in Holocaust memory. One might argue that we are missing a critical and distancing perspective which might lead to trivializing the Holocaust; further, the role of the “fact-checking” institution is minimalised, yet factual knowledge is important for decoding Holocaust denial and distortion. The media network of memory reveals the extent to which individuals moderate, shape and discuss the Holocaust in light of survivors’ testimonies. This “individual turn” is central for Holocaust memory in the twenty-first century where the digital universe serves as an integral part for connecting people with history, places and memories. Individuals use the full range of media for establishing networks to create values by participatory actions, and they integrate practices of sharing. Consequently, individualisation – manifested in relational approaches to history(ies) – is inextricably linked to the desire for community – expressed in sharing. Individualisation and community are two sides of a coin, so to speak. Institutions that have dedicated their work to Holocaust education for many years must now face the question of how they want to position themselves in the era of the “individual turn”.

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<sup>67</sup> Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Mishra Brenner, “Digital Sites of Tension: The Holocaust on Social Media in Contemporary Europe,” in *Sites of Tension: Shifts in Holocaust memory in Relation to Antisemitism and Political Contestation in Europe*, ed. Nurit Novis-Deutsch, Shmuel Lederman, Tracy Adams and Arie J. Kochavi (Haifa: The Weiss-Livnat International Center for Holocaust Research and Education, 2023), 362–363.

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