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Layers of Memory in Kuznetsov's and Trubakov's Babi Yar Narratives

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Abstract: This article examines two memoirs of authors who indirectly witnessed the horrendous crimes committed by Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* squads in Babi Yar where more than 33,000 of the Jewish inhabitants of Kiev were brutally murdered on 29–30 September 1941: Anatoli Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel* and Ziama Trubakov's *The Riddle of Babi Yar: The True Story Told by a Survivor of the Mass Murders in Kiev, 1941–1943*. Starting from Kuznetsov's final remarks on the power of memory that will never fade even if only few witnesses or survivors remained to tell the story, I will show what types of witnessing occur in both memoirs: the two narrators use both "ear-witnessing" (Susan Vice's term), eye-witnessing, and "flesh-witnessing" (Yuval Noah Harari's term) in the structure of their books and, following Amos Goldberg's model for first-person Holocaust memoirs and diaries, I will show how these three types of witnessing unfold the story of Babi Yar.

Keywords: Babi Yar, Kuznetsov, Trubakov, witnessing, memory

After the June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany created "special troops" (*Einsatzgruppen*), also known as "mobile combat units" of the SS, whose aim was to kill the Jewish population within the field of intervention ranging from the Baltic to all of White Russia.[1] The number of their victims is estimated at between 1,500,000 and 1,800,000 persons (see Desbois 2008; Rubenstein and Altman 2008). On 29–30 September 1941, one of these squads slaughtered 33,771 of the Jewish inhabitants of Kiev in a ravine called Babi Yar or Babyn Yar (Gilbert 1986, 206). In 1943 the Nazis used prisoners from the Syrets camp to exhume and incinerate the bodies from the 1941 shootings and other subsequent murders.

This article examines two narratives by authors who indirectly witnessed these horrendous events: Anatoli Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of*

1 See definitions in Venezia 2009, 168. Venezia uses historical information from Krausnick 1993 and Klein 1997.

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a Novel and Ziama Trubakov's *The Riddle of Babi Yar: The True Story Told by a Survivor of the Mass Murders in Kiev, 1941–1943*. Both narratives are acts of remembrance, first-person memoirs where the writer's life is "described within the context of the events to which the author was a witness and a party" (Goldberg 2017, 12). Kuznetsov's memoir is written from the point of view of a first-person narrator who was 12 years old when the events took place; his subtitle retains the form of a "documentary novel," which "suggests the possibility of fictionalizing elisions and transformations within the private domain of the boy's experience" (Toker 2004, 198). However, Kuznetsov explains: "the word 'Document' which appears in the sub-title of this novel means that I have included in it only facts and documents, and that it contains not the slightest element of literary invention – of what 'might have been' or what 'ought to have been'" (Anatoli 1970, 17). Trubakov claims to tell "the true story" of Babi Yar, as the subtitle of his book indicates.[2]

My aims are to analyse three types of witnessing (in the case of Trubakov's book, also following Amos Goldberg's theoretical model for reading of traumatic diaries or memoirs), and to show how the two narratives work as different layers of memory: one from outside (Kuznetsov) and one from inside the horror (Trubakov), thus complementing each other and offering a fuller picture of the dreadful "Holocaust by bullets," of which Babi Yar was a major part.

In her classical account on witnessing, Shoshana Felman claimed that "[b]y virtue of the fact that the testimony is addressed to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension beyond himself" (1992, 3) Both, Kuznetsov and Trubakov were aware of such a dimension, and they communicated it directly to their readers via discursive practices, asserting that they intend their works as testimony. These works become "material evidence for truth" (Felman 1992, 5).

According to Leona Toker, "the mid 1960s, when *Babii Yar* was originally composed, were a momentary heyday for documentary prose in the Soviet Union" (2004, 197). However, when it first appeared, in 1966, in the famous literary journal *Iunost'* (Youth) and then in book form, arousing "a sensation in the Soviet Union and abroad" and bringing its author "a considerable income from honoraria, advances, and movie rights" (Toker 2004, 197), it was heavily censored. The uncensored book was published both in Russian and in English in 1970, after Kuznetsov defected from the Soviet Union and applied for a UK residence permit, assuming the pen name A. Anatolii. "David Floyd's translation includes the material that was first published in *Iunost'* in 1966 presented in regular type face, the passages and phrases that the author claimed had been deleted from that version in bold type, and later additions in square brackets" (Toker 2004, 196–97).

2 See also Trubakov's interview taken on July 1, 1992 (Trubakov 1995, 4 videocassettes).

The author claimed that the "new, complete, uncensored version" of *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel* contained "nothing but the truth" (Anatoli 1970, 13) and that he wrote it "**as though [he] were giving evidence under oath in the very highest court and [was] ready to answer for every single word. This book records only the truth – AS IT REALLY HAPPENED**" (14).

The book ends with Kuznetsov's reasons for writing his memoir – the conviction that memory can never be erased:

> Some old Masha who saw everything will always turn up, or else a few people – a dozen, two or even just one – will manage to escape and live to tell the tale. **However much you burn and disperse and cover over and trample down, human memory still remains.** History cannot be deceived, and it is impossible to conceal something from it for ever. (Anatoli 1970, 477)

Trubakov's memoir invokes the imperative *Never again* in one of its last paragraphs: "So, may what you have read about in this book never happen again, anywhere in the world. I, Zakhar Abramovich Trubakov, eyewitness and protagonist in those terrible events, say this to you. I, the only survivor of those 327 who started the uprising in Babi Yar" (Trubakov 2014, 232). His signature thus inscribed, and almost giving his book the power of a legal document, places an emphasis on *Never again*, "the hallmark of public commemoration on the Israeli Day of Remembrance for victims of the Nazi persecution of the Jews" (Winter 2010, 313).

Trubakov was among those who did not follow the Nazis' order to join the crowds of Jews on the morning of Monday, September 29, 1941, and, thus, escaped the hell of Babi Yar until he became its witness in August 1943, as part of the forced-labour detail whose task was to hide the traces of mass murder. The task of cremating corpses prompted the 327 prisoners to entertain thoughts of escape, especially knowing that the last fire they were to prepare would have been for themselves. Only 13 prisoners survived.

Aware of the fact that "the new generation has never known and never experienced" any atrocity similar to what he described in his book, Trubakov made himself the voice that future generations, and especially the relatives of the victims should hear, assuming also the paradoxical role of speaking in the name of those who are no longer there to affirm life:

> I am writing this for the children and grandchildren of all the prisoners, those who managed to escape and those who met their death behind the high-voltage wire fences where we, the innocent, were kept like cattle by the Nazi invaders.
> … I am writing in the hope that one day they will want to learn more about the great war, the persecution of the Jews and the European catastrophe. I want them to learn it not from the "researchers" and commentators but from someone who had experienced first-hand the events of Babi Yar. (Trubakov 2014, 230–31)

Trubakov's secondary aim was fighting denial about what happened in Babi Yar in 1941. He invoked Tetyana [sic] Tur's article "The Truth about Babi Yar" (*Evening Kiev*, 16–19 March 1996) which questioned whether it could be proved that Jews had been shot to death, asserting that perhaps they had been sent by train to suburban farms and to Minsk. Trubakov added: "I can't even imagine where such malevolent people come from and how they can deny the obvious when there are documents and eyewitness testimonies in the law courts, all proving as a fact the extermination of tens of thousands of Jews" (Trubakov 2014, 232).

Indirectly, Kuznetsov declares a similar goal in "A Word from the Author," invoking a former high-ranking officer in the Gestapo who had

> declared recently in an interview that there had never been any death camps, ovens or gas-chambers, that all such things had been invented by propagandists. He stated, quite simply, that they had *never existed*. He was not as mad as he might seem. He goes on living and working like an automaton, conditioned by rules based on the principle of "Keep on lying – something will stick; call black white, death happiness, the Leader a god, and promise mountains of gold in the future – there will always be people ready to believe you." (Anatoli 1970, 390–91)

In "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," Dori Laub distinguishes between three levels of witnessing: "the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself" (Laub 1992, 75). While the first level refers to the eyewitness-survivor (Laub describes his own "distinct memories" of "deportation, arrival in the camp, and the subsequent life" of his family when deported to Transnistria), the second refers to a participant "not in the events, but in the account given of them," as "a companion on the eerie journey of the testimony" (1992, 76). Finally, the third is a narrator-listener alternation "between moving closer and then retreating from the experience" (Laub 1992, 76). In this third level, which is close to what Thomas Trezise (2013, 9) called "witnessing witnessing," both narrator and listener "need to halt and reflect on these memories as they are spoken, so as to reassert the veracity of the past and to build anew its linkage to, and assimilation into, present-day life" (Laub 1992, 76).[3] Both Kuznetsov and Trubakov experienced all the three levels, although, while Trubakov was a Jewish survivor of the Babi Yar events of 1943, Kuznetsov was of Ukrainian and Russian descent and did not report as a witness to himself in connection to Babi Yar but rather in connection to all the events he could observe

3 I come back here to some of my thoughts on witnessing from "Towards an Affective Ludo-ethics of Re-enactment: Witnessing in *Attentat 1942*," *Parallax* 28.3 forthcoming 2022.

as a child from (and before) September 21, 1941, when the Nazis took control over Kiev, until the liberation of Kiev in 1943.

I shall now discuss three types of witnesses that Kuznetsov's story puts forward: "ear-witnesses," eyewitnesses, and "flesh witnesses."

I am borrowing the term "ear-witnesses" from Sue Vice's analysis on Kazimierz Sakowicz's *Ponary Diary, 1941–1943: A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder*, which emphasized, "in representational terms," the fact that the killings of 100,000 Jewish people in the Ponary forest outside Vilnius in Lithuania "were often carried out 'directly within earshot' of local populations" (Vice 2019, 96). Vice described Sakowicz's role as follows: he is "not simply an eyewitness, although he records by these means such details as the number of victims, their clothing, appearance, attempts at escape, as well as the murderers' ruses in camouflaging the executions" (Vice 2019, 96). Kuznetsov's role is similar: he recorded everything he saw and what others recounted, but mostly what he had heard. In this process of "witnessing," both the beginning and the end of the book reveal that he wrote his memoir in the aftermath of the events yet without being able to detach from the horrendous episodes; despite the temporal distance, what he had heard as a twelve-year-old child chillingly brought him back to the scene of disaster:

> We could only hear bursts of machine-gun fire at various intervals: ta-ta-ta, ta-ta… For two long years I could hear them, day after day, and even now they still ring in my ears. (Anatoli 1970, 15)

> I started writing this book in Kiev, in my mother's shack. But then I found I couldn't go on with it – I just couldn't sleep. I would hear cries as I lay in bed at night – sometimes I was lying on the ground and they were shooting straight at me, in the chest or in the back of the neck, or else I was standing to one side with a notebook in my hand and waiting for it to start, but they didn't shoot because it was their dinner break. … That nightmare pursued me, something between dream and reality, and I would jump up with the cries of thousands of dying people ringing in my ears. (Anatoli 1970, 477)

These fragments dwell more on what he heard than on what he saw, and hence the prevalence of traumatic auditory images: he could still hear the machine-guns and the cries.

Returning to the beginning of the narrative that recounts what the narrator saw and then heard in 1941, we process the events through the mind of the curious twelve-year-old who "could not, of course, miss such a rare spectacle as the deportation of the Jews from Kiev" (Anatoli 1970, 93). Yet, what was officially announced as "deportation" begins to look like something else. The child registers first the large number of invalids, old and sick people, and then the huge crowds of people coming from different streets, and starts wondering: "Where are they taking them? What are they doing to them?" until he hears that on Melnikov Street, "a

barrier had been put up, and that they were letting people in but not back out again" (Anatoli 1970, 95), at which point he starts taking fright himself that he might not be able to return. Back home, he becomes an "ear-witness" when his grandfather makes him aware of what is heard:

> From Babi Yar came quite distinctly the sound of regular bursts of machine-gun fire: ta-ta-ta, ta-ta…
> It was the sort of rather quiet, unexcited, measured firing you heard when they were training. (Anatoli 1970, 96)

The child's first reaction is denial, suggesting that a fight is going on, yet the grandfather confirms that "[s]ome folk have climbed trees and seen what's going on" (Anatoli 1970, 96). Moving indoors, they could still hear firing for one more day.

If Kuznetsov was not there to see the full horror of 29 September 1941, he made sure he inserted into his story the accounts of eyewitnesses and "flesh witnesses" who could testify about the crimes which were committed from the very place where they took place. The full name of old Masha that he refers to at the end of his memoir was Maria Lutsenko, who was an eyewitness. The Nazi overlooked her house which was in the cemetery just above the ravine where they committed their crimes at Babi Yar:

> I used to walk round there with her and she would show me again and again just where it started, where they had dynamited the hillside and how "Over there and there they used to lay them on the ground. And how they screamed!… Oh, Mother of God… They would keep on hitting them with spades." As she said this she would be pointing beneath the surface, deep down, because we were standing over a ravine which no longer existed. It is only people like her who have lived there for a long time who can still point out the shape of Babi Yar, the remains of the dam and other traces of what happened there. (Anatoli 1970, 476)[4]

The most vivid description of the full horror of Babi Yar is relayed by Dina Pronicheva, an actress of the Kyiv Puppet Theatre and a survivor, a "flesh-witness." The latter term is used by Yuval Noah Harari to designate people who have themselves suffered the things that they testify to. Harari explains that "flesh-witness" accounts "convey authority" and, unlike eyewitness account

4 In his book, Martin Gilbert includes another non-Jew's testimony of, the watchman of the old Jewish cemetery, who confirmed what Maria Lutsenko had described. He had also witnessed "horrible scenes of human grief and despair": "they found themselves on the narrow ground above the precipice, 20–25 m in height, and on the opposite side there were the Germans' machine guns. The killed, wounded and half-alive people fell down and were smashed there. Then the next hundred were brought, and everything repeated again. The policemen took the children by the legs and threw them alive down into the Yar" (see Gilbert 1986, 203).

which "must provide the audience with factual knowledge," they may "gain authority without providing the audience with knowledge" (Harari 2009, 222). Moreover, "[h]earing a flesh-witness narrative is consequently a rather one-sided exchange which empowers the witness while often disempowering the audience" (Harari 2009, 222).

Records of Pronicheva's testimony emerged over the years; it was reproduced in Kuznetsov's memoir and re-imagined in D. M Thomas's *The White Hotel*.[5] Thus, the objectivity of the most important witnessing scene in the memoir is achieved by presenting "the horrifying predicament of the victims of execution … from the point of view of a person who was in their midst, with resulting empathy and immediacy, even though with the touch of distance of a witness who had fallen into the trap meant for others and who managed to escape" (Toker 2004, 198).

Pronicheva's story is, unlike Kuznetsov's testimonial, predominantly visual. She starts from the moment she "put her rucksack on her back" (Anatoli 1970, 100) and left with her parents and sister for the Jewish cemetery where they were supposed to gather for resettlement, with a feeling that "something was wrong" (Anatoli 1970, 103). Encouragement comes from those in the crowd who reminded the others that in 1918 the Germans "hadn't touched" the Jews from Ukraine, "but on the contrary had treated them very decently" (Anatoli 1970, 103). Yet this reassuring feeling comes to an end: Pronicheva realizes that everyone is to be executed when a soldier orders her to take off her coat, and when she attempts to escape, has her identity card inspected by a soldier who yells at her "bloody Jewess! Get back!" (Anatoli 1970, 104).

Susan Sontag argues that "the very notion of atrocity, of war crime, is associated with the expectation of photographic evidence" (Sontag 2003, 83), an assertion demonstrated by David Shneer's *Grief: The Biography of a Holocaust Photograph* which analyses how Dmitri Baltermants's iconic photograph "Grief" documents the horror of Holocaust. The photograph depicts a scene after the Nazi massacre of Jews in the Crimean city of Kerch in 1942, with grieving village women searching for the bodies of their loved ones.

Pronicheva's testimony records atrocity almost photographically even if photographs of the event are absent, for obvious reasons. However, in the absence of photographs, her testimony captures something that Shneer deems "the limits

5 Thomas was accused of plagiarizing Pronicheva's account from Kuznetsov's book, and his response to such allegations was as follows: "I wanted the events to be authentic. It would have seemed immoral had I, a comfortable Briton, fictionalized the Holocaust" (Thomas 1988, 47). According to Cates Baldridge, "*The White Hotel* manages, through the juxtaposition of its penultimate section and its coda, to comply with two seemingly incompatible moral assertions about representing the Holocaust: that one must stick rigorously to the historical facts, and that one must not 'reduce' the Shoah to just another historical event" (Baldridge 2018, 496).

of a camera's ability to document horror: 'The camera did not capture what Baltermants experienced that cold January day in Kerch'" (Shneer 2020, 186), which is precisely because, like Pronicheva, Baltermants was a "flesh-witness."

Pronicheva begins her "flesh-witness" story as follows: "At that moment they entered a long corridor formed by two rows of soldiers and dogs. It was very narrow – some four or five feet across. The soldiers were lined up shoulder to shoulder, with their sleeves rolled up, each of them brandishing a rubber club or a big stick" (Anatoli 1970, 105). Soon Pronicheva's story is transformed into an account from hell: soldiers keep shouting: "*Schnnell! Schnnell!*" while distributing "brutal blows" (Anatoli 1970, 106), setting dogs on those who have fallen to the ground, making people undress, ripping their clothes off by force, while her mother is yelling at her to save herself as she has no Jewish appearance. Pronicheva threw away her identity card, but her attempt to escape by passing as a Ukrainian did not work, though she was told that she would be let out once all the Jews were killed. The Ukrainians who got there by mistake were to be shot as well; an officer explained that if any got out and started to talk in the city, the plan would be compromised for the next day (Anatoli 1970, 108). Pronicheva let herself fall in the ravine before the machine gun started shooting, and bullets did not touch her. Pretending to be dead, Pronicheva "hung limp and gave no signs of life," in spite of being kicked in her breast with a heavy boot and trodden on her right hand when an SS-man checked if there was anyone alive (Anatoli 1970, 110). She managed to avoid suffocation, breathed through the sand that the Ukrainian police had shovelled to cover the dead, and climbed out of the pit. On her way out of the mass grave, she met another survivor, Motya, "a good-looking child with lovely eyes which looked at Dina as though she was his saviour" (Anatoli 1970, 112). She witnessed other dreadful episodes: a grandmother and her grandchild shot, two women raped and killed with bayonets. Yet despite the system of horror that proceeded with methodical persistence in Babi Yar, the incredible bond created between Pronicheva and the little boy who had lost his entire family made her envisage salvation and even think of adopting the boy. He was, however, shot by Germans later on.

In 2008, Karel Berkhoff classified the 12 written records of Pronicheva's testimony (of which none had been tape-recorded and two were second-hand), establishing their provenance. They date back to the 1940s, the 1960s, and later; some "were entirely unavailable before the dissolution of the Soviet Union" (Berkhoff 2008, 295). According to Berkhoff, we have no knowledge of Pronicheva's authorization of Kuznetsov's record, in spite of Kuznetsov's claiming "I am now going to tell her story, as I wrote it down myself from her own words, without adding anything of my own" (Berkhoff 2008, 298; Anatoli 1970, 98). Moreover, Kuznetsov added a parenthesis to his text, mentioning that he

persuaded her to tell her story of survival after "tremendous difficulty," for "she did not believe that it could ever be published or that it would serve any good purpose. It took her several days to tell her story, which was interrupted by a number of heart attacks" (Anatoli 1970, 119–20). However, Berkhoff argues against this "candid description of the genesis of the text," and demonstrates that the version that Kuznetsov used (variant PR6, according to Berkhoff) "may be less a deposition (as claimed by Kuznetsov) than a combination of two testimonies"; therefore, its qualities as a historical document are doubtful (2008, 299). While Berkhoff was interested in checking whether every single sentence from Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* corresponds to PR6, my point is different. As I mentioned in another research, in a famous debate with historians on the inaccurate testimony of an eyewitness to the Auschwitz uprising, Dori Laub "called upon those present – historians, psychoanalysts and artists – to interrogate the status of witnessing" (Ionescu 2017, 23), showing that, indeed, the testimony was not accurate according to historians, since the number of chimneys was misrepresented: "Since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept – nor give credence to – her whole account of the events. It was utterly important to remain accurate, lest the revisionists in history discredit everything" (Laub 1992, 59–60). However, as I mentioned elsewhere, "the blinkered obsession with factuality – the (in)accuracy in the number of chimneys – had to recede behind the 'performative' force of the woman's reconstruction, which entailed the necessity to redefine what 'bearing witness' implied historically" (Ionescu 2017, 23). Laub had shown that the testimony of the woman brought about "something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence" in Auschwitz where one chimney blown up "was as incredible as four" (Laub 1992, 60). The same can be said about the use of Pronicheva's story embedded in Kuznetsov's memoir. Whether it is one single testimony or two combined, its/their role is to testify to the crucial truth: that more than 33,000 people were mercilessly killed by bullets in two days.

A few years after Berkhoff's detailed chapter on the versions of Pronicheva's story, The Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center made public a documentary project presented by Ukrainian director Sergey Loznitsa, which contains 20–25 complete stories directly or indirectly related to the tragedy of Babyn Yar,[6] displayed as episodes edited from archive materials, from 1941, when the Nazis invaded the USSR, to 1966, when the first architectural competition for the design of the Babyn Yar Memorial was organized. Pronicheva's witness statement at the

6 As the declarations included in the project show, there were a few other survivors, including Dina Levina, Raisa Dashekevich, and David Ayzenberg. Other testimonies of survivors include Reuben Stein's (see Sokolovskaya 2008) and Genia Batasheva (see Berkhoff 2015).

trial of case No. 1679, "On the atrocities committed by fascist invaders on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR," on the evening of January 24, 1946, is part of this project (Pronicheva 1946). Kuznetsov's version corresponds to her testimony and does not depart from the truth, supplementing his "ear-witness" account by a "flesh-witness" report.

Trubakov's memoir combines two different temporal (1941 and 1943) and slightly different although proximate spatial dimensions (the ravine and the Syrets labour camp) and focuses on both "ear-witnessing," and "flesh-witnessing." As Vice has noted, "in *The Riddle of Babi Yar* the eponymous ravine is a place as well as an event, and, despite its concern with 'the Holocaust by bullets' and its aftermath, Trubakov's memoir presents the image of a different kind of camp in the form of a testimony of a familiar kind" (Vice 2019, 94).

At the beginning of his book, Trubakov offers a weaker form of "ear-witnessing"; he is one of those who did not follow the Nazi order on September 29, 1941, and who chose to save themselves: "[w]ith the help of the local population and due to the incompetence of the gendarmes, many Jews, especially orphaned children, saved themselves. Their intuition and vigilance, heightened by constant exposure to danger, protected them. Of course, those who didn't look Jewish, had more luck" (Trubakov 2014: 66).

We learn that Trubakov was born in 1912, in a poor family of six children and was forced to start working at the age of 13. Before the war he was a foreman in a metalworking section at Plant #225 in Kiev. When the order came for "all the Yids in Kiev and its environs … to appear at 8 am on Monday September 29, 1941 at the corner of Melnika and Dokterivska Streets" (Trubakov 2014, 30), Ziama not only decided to stay in the house of his mother-in-law with his daughter and his Ukrainian wife who was recovering from a very difficult surgery but also tried to persuade others to disobey, telling them about the massacres in Minsk. Helped by his wife to forge an official certificate, changing the Jewish name Ziama to Zakhar, he destroyed his passport, claiming that it had been confiscated by the Bolsheviks.

On 3 February 1942, Trubakov was caught by the Gestapo, thrown into a cell with 20 people, put in a gas van, yet not killed but sent to the Syrets labour camp. The events that took place in the Syrets camp and in Babi Yar are, to follow Amos Goldberg's interpretation of first-person Holocaust narratives, "[t]he product of the extreme and exceptional nature of the circumstances" in which prisoner Trubakov found himself, a "traumatic encounter with the unfamiliar, the anomalous, and the transgressive that arouses the impulse to write" (Goldberg 2017, 90). The memoir adds much information on the experience of those who were not killed at Babi Yar in 1941 but were left to die an infinitely longer, slow death.

Alongside testimonies of survivors of the *Sonderkommandos*, Shlomo Venezia (2009), Filip Müller (1979), and the survivors whom Gideon Greif (2005)

interviewed for his book *We Wept without Tears* (Josef Sackar, Abraham and Shlomo Dragon, Ya'akov Gabai, Eliezer Eisenschmidt, Shaul Chazan, Leon Cohen, and Ya'akov Silberberg), Trubakov's memoir as a member of *Sonderaktion* 1005 can be analysed via Goldberg's autobiographical Holocaust-writing model: "in its most extreme moments," a diary or a memoir can also be considered "an attempt to recount symbolic death and thereby overcome it, if only very partially" (Goldberg 2017, 79). Goldberg reads such works as "a kind of 'resurrection,'" the result of "the symbolic death that looms over the subject at a time of radical persecution" and gives the text "a source of catastrophic potential" (Goldberg 2017, 79).

The sections devoted to the Syrets camp keep readers within the confines of the scenes of horror present in many camp diaries or memoirs that describe the perpetrators' violence upon the defenceless prisoners. In his analysis of Fela Szeps' diary (2002), Goldberg notes that the Holocaust witness's impulse to write is immediately threatened by two obstacles: the fact that from "the 'normal world' perspective," the events are "extreme, illusory, and impossible," and that a former prisoner of a camp would have become accustomed to the "the symbolic order of the murderous oppressor, whereby they, as prisoners, have absolutely no right or possibility of desiring a change in their circumstances" (Goldberg 2017, 90–91). Trubakov's memoir reveals both obstacles. The first is illustrated by fragments reflecting the perpetrators' cruelty and how inmates became what Primo Levi called the "living dead," and "walking corpses" (1996, 86). Trubakov's cousin Kiva Krichevsky calls them "goners" and describes the process that transforms a human being into an automaton: "'Remember, during the first month here we lose weight. During the second month we start to swell from malnutrition. Then some of us die right here, on their bunks, others get shot while working. The final stage you're a goner'" (Trubakov 2014, 83).

Trubakov describes the cruelty of the camp commander Radomsky, who "liked to arrive early in the morning and force one of the squadrons to do a barbarously exhausting workout" and set his dog on those he did not like; after "Rex would pounce and tear chunks off the poor wretch's body," Radomsky calmed down (Trubakov 2014, 101).

Vice (2019, 94) characterized Trubakov's memoir as a "mixture of a chronological and memorious structure, alongside its deployment of literary techniques particular to Trubakov, such as address to the reader – 'Perhaps you remember the great actress Faina Ranevskaya' – and the avoidance of hindsight, so that the chaos of events is presented before they are interpreted," a tendency that becomes obvious through the use of "present-tense narration in an effort to convey the significance of the moment of escape." Moreover, Trubakov also creates an implicit dialogue with the reader, placing further reflections formulated as rhetorical questions about the perpetrator's brutality:

> What did he get from these acts of cruelty? Did they really give him a boost? Now, half a century after that, I still think about it, but can't find an answer. Could it be that for these positions the Nazis deliberately appointed individuals prone to sadism? Because in order to be able to torment and butcher defenseless people one should be a blood-thirsty psychopath, totally lacking empathy and compassion. (Trubakov 2014, 101)

In the part dealing with *Sonderaktion* 1005, Vice identifies a literary convention of non-disclosure: the first-person narrator withholds hindsight information which he did not possess at the time; this generates a limited temporal perspective and recreates the "agony" of the prisoners who gradually discover what their mission is (Vice 2019, 94). Indeed, if at the beginning they think that they have started digging what seems to them a grave for themselves, on the fourth day of "archeological excavations," they "finally hit solid rock" (Trubakov 2014, 158–9) and find that "the rock" is made up of human bodies. Eye witnessing this hell in which their mission is to arrange corpses on a furnace with an ash-pit is "unendurable": "We had to break up a thick layer of bodies. Almost all of them lay face down. Women clutched their children in a deadly embrace. … We were unable to detach corpses from one another, and for this we were beaten about the head again and again" (Trubakov 2014, 160–61).

Trubakov was appointed "*gold-sucher*" – he had to "search the pockets, and then open the mouth and, with pincers, pull out gold teeth" (Trubakov 2014, 162). He records the effects that this ferocious assault on humanity produced on the squadron members: "many of the prisoners feel nauseated; they broke out in a cold sweat and hyperventilated" (Trubakov 2014, 159); some lost their minds and were shot on the spot or committed suicide (Trubakov 2014, 161) – they were replaced by the SS with newcomers who were always encouraged by those who "struggled against suicide": "'Since you got to this hell, hold on to the end'" (Trubakov 2014, 167).

The assault on humanity is embodied in the image of the Nazi "cannibalistic factory" that "ran like clockwork": "A specially designated officer was responsible for counting the corpses and making sure that exactly 3000 – and not even one more – were put onto each kiln. … Thus stacked up, the 3000 corpses reminded me of the famous painting by the Russian painter Vasily Vereshchagin 'The Apotheosis of War.' You'll remember: a pyramidal mountain of skulls with empty sockets" (Trubakov 2014, 164). Trubakov gives several other details on the combustion process that "lasted about 36 h," the fat collected "in a special pit that was dug up next to the oven" (165). After the comment "Never before could I have imagined that man could do such things to other human beings and put so little value on human life" (Trubakov 2014, 165), another reference to visual arts is made: "In the movie 'Alexander Nevski' there is a scene: at Lake Ladoga the Germans throw

Russian children into the fire. Before the war we couldn't believe that it was possible" (Trubakov 2014, 165).

Trubakov's repeated comparing of the frightful events he describes with works of visual arts make the reader almost visualize the scenes photographically in the absence of the photographs that nobody could take:

> And the Nazis did it with a clear conscience and bookkeeping meticulousness. They even forced us to grind the bones on huge slabs of rock and then pass everything through a sieve: this is when they found all the gold I had tried to conceal so that they couldn't take it from the dead. The ground bones, together with the ashes, were spread over the nearby vegetable gardens. This way the Nazis covered, or rather believed that they would succeed in covering, all traces of their unprecedented and appalling crimes. (Trubakov 2014, 166)

Sontag notes that "the photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb. Each of us mentally stocks hundreds of photographs, subject to instant recall" (Sontag 2003, 22). Trubakov becomes a camera that stocks for his readers images of the shocking scenes that he witnessed, photographs that he produced as words on the page.

The second obstacle in witnessing that Goldberg mentions is best illustrated by episodes in which Trubakov mentions how those who had the desire to change their circumstances were mercilessly eliminated. Trubakov registers the torturers' cruelty towards those who were more eager to live on than the prisoners who had got used to the idea that they were not to leave the camp alive. More than once, Trubakov registers the excessive violence of oppressors against young inmates. In the camp, Trubakov befriended young Misha Korshun, helping him with his own bread and sugar, and the only medicine he had from his wife when Misha could not take it anymore. The boy, who used to call Trubakov "Uncle Zakhar" and confessed to him repeatedly how much he wanted to live and meet his mother again (Trubakov 2014, 135), was killed as if in an appalling joke made by Kapo Piotr Maykabog, a "torturer," who ordered Misha to tie a rope at the top of a tree and then forced some inmates to saw the tree without letting Misha climb down. After the fall, the boy was buried half-alive in a pit and a policeman finished him off by chopping off his head, complaining that he was dying hard. Trubakov describes the atmosphere after the death of the boy:

> After this monstrous murder the guards turned round and walked away, just as if nothing had happened. The prisoners just stood there, frozen and bewildered by what they had witnessed. I was sobbing uncontrollably at the loss of this boy who had become so close to me. (Trubakov 2014, 137–38)

In the camp the conditions were toughest for teenagers who needed more food than adults. Trubakov tells the story of the six teenagers who worked in the

squadron unit: four died, one was "transferred" to the oven and one, Kolya, "attempted to stealthily take one more ration of bread" (Trubakov 2014, 179). In a fragment that corresponds to "the symbolic order of the murderous oppressor, whereby they, as prisoners, have absolutely no right or possibility of desiring a change in their circumstances" (Goldberg 2017, 90–91), Trubakov gives one more account of how the teenager's desire to live ends in another disaster orchestrated by the *Sturmbannführer* who "graciously allowed him to take food," a seemingly "sudden act of kindness": the boy was asked to eat his bread on his knees and shot before he "could take even one bite from the Nazi treat. Bloody bread indeed" (Trubakov 2014, 179). The words "Bloody bread indeed" sound like a title of a photograph or painting of the horrendous scene.

Yet, Trubakov is not "choked by the words of the murderer" but manages to keep his humanity and instil it in those who are just about to lose it:

> Personally, I didn't think either that anyone would get out of this place alive. But a glimmer of hope still lived in my subconscious, nourishing my mind and my psyche with one stubborn thought: I must not die! That's why I didn't lose my composure during this saturnalia of death. I have to admit that some of the inmates, including Volodya Kuklia, approached me with a question:
> Zakhar, why are you so calm about everything?
> They thought maybe I knew something special that allowed me to survive in these inhuman conditions. My usual answer to this was:
> You can't chicken out now. You should look death straight in the eye, maybe it'll turn away. (Trubakov 2014, 167)

Thinking of his daughter Svetochka, whose photo he kept in a golden locket that he found on one of the dead women he exhumed, Trubakov managed to go through horror with this mental state intact: "I made a vow to myself: 'If Svetochka is happy, then I am destined to live…'" (Trubakov 2014, 186).

All sorts of superstitions, "dreams and omens" that prisoners would tell one another (Trubakov 2014, 186) kept those who were still mentally stable alive and made them resist both the physical annihilation and the symbolical murder performed by their oppressors (see Goldberg 2017, 93). For instance, when a mouse crawled into his jacket, his comrades interpreted it as a sign of good luck. Trubakov decided to spare the mouse even though it could have been food for the prisoners who were undernourished, thinking that the mouse would "give hope" to another inmate (Trubakov 2014, 192).

Trubakov denies that he may have lost his will to live. In the camp he managed to meet his wife with the help of a guard, Nikolai Shevchenko, "a man who hasn't lost his humanity and his conscience" (Trubakov 2014, 96).

Moreover, even in Babi Yar, a glitter of hope remains:

> Occasionally, our meager ration was supplemented from a "delicatessen." It happened when those who spread the ashes and crushed bones over the vegetable gardens, brought back from this "expedition" some stolen potatoes or other roots. But there was another problem: how to boil these "trophies" so that the guards wouldn't know? We were given water only for drinking. We managed to save some of it and then boiled the dirty potatoes on the smoldering bones. Then, without any salt, with indescribable bliss, we ate our potatoes down to the last morsel, oblivious to the smoke and stench that had become our constant companions. (Trubakov 2014, 196)

After several weeks of life together performing this tragic, ghastly job those prisoners who did not commit suicide or lose their minds became a family of siblings who tried to stay alive and finally attempted to escape. Some made it, most did not.

Read in parallel, the two narratives confirm what happened in Babi Yar and complement each other. A number of events is described by both authors, yet for historical documentation Trubakov is certainly more precise, since he was in the ravine himself. Both authors use documents; their texts contain *verbatim* the numerous announcements that Jewish and Ukrainian people were sent after the Nazis occupied Ukraine. Both reveal that the victims of Babi Yar also included non-Jews and that the ravine continued to be a place where other victims were executed after September 1941.

Paul Robert Magocsi estimated that the ravine was used for two more years "as a site for executions and mass burials, which were to claim an estimated 100,000–150,000 more lives (Soviet prisoners of war, partisans, Ukrainian nationalists, and Gypsies as well as Jews)" (Magosci 1996, 633). Although not offering a figure of the victims, Kuznetsov starts his memoir on his visit to Babi Yar with his question to an old Ukrainian man whether it was there that the Jews were shot, and the reproachful answer: "'And what about all the Russians who were killed here, and the Ukrainians and other kinds of people?'" Therefore, he corrects himself: "we concluded that the place where the Jews, Russians, Ukrainians and people of other nationalities had been shot was somewhere higher up" (Anatoli 1970, 16). Trubakov gives a precise figure: 127,000 dead people, judging from the number of ovens that were used (Trubakov 2014, 229).

Both authors use accounts of eyewitnesses and "flesh-witnesses." Kuznetsov uses Pronicheva's account, and Trubakov not only testifies himself but also places an Appendix at the end of his book, with transcripts of interrogations of ex-prisoners of the Syrets concentration camps by the KGB, mentioning that he did not alter any declaration and, for "historical accuracy," left all "occasional lapses in grammar and style" as they were (Trubakov 2014, 233). Trubakov's declared purpose was also to "separate the truth from the many legends, especially as this story unfolded before [his] very eyes" (Trubakov 2014, 124).

Trubakov's narrative completes the full picture of the "Holocaust by bullets," working as a layer of memory coming from inside horror. Although he was not there when this atrocity took place, he gives his readers a much closer view of the barbaric crimes than Kuznetsov who was there but only heard what happened. Trubakov's harrowing details about the dimension of the crime become even more explicit and personal when he finds the corpse of his own uncle that he recognizes because of a prosthetic leg. In the pockets of the dead man he finds the passport and then the family photo; they confirm the dead man's identity: "Dear faces were looking at me from it, my relatives, living and dead" (Trubakov 2014, 181). He remembers how he tried to persuade his uncle not to obey the Nazi order, how he showed him the newspaper that wrote about the shooting of Jews in Minsk, and how his uncle believed that this was all propaganda, since in 1919 the Germans did not touch the Jews (this is actually a reference to the same event that Kuznetsov related via Pronicheva, "The Operation *Faustschlag*" in 1918). Trubakov announces to his cousin that he found the corpse of his father and they take Simon's body to the oven together: "Together with Kiva we lifted the remains of his father, then he slowly carried them to the oven. Tears were streaming down his chalk-white face. He walked in silence, holding the blackened remains of his father" (Trubakov 2014, 182).

Kuznetsov visited the Syrets camp, to deliver a gift for Radomsky (Anatoli 1970, 352); he realized the danger he exposed himself to only in the aftermath of the event. As a witness to possible horrors going on behind the "barbed wire charged with electricity," he remembers seeing prisoners, but he is again struck by sounds rather than images, remaining an "ear-witness" rather than an eyewitness: "And I had heard the sound of shooting beyond the barracks, but there was now shooting everywhere. Like a sparrow, I had flown into the cage and flown out again and I had been lucky" (Anatoli 1970, 353).

To Kuznetsov's stories Trubakov adds a "flesh-witness" account of a number of events: the escape of one prisoner and the Nazi revenge, killing 12 prisoners at random (Anatoli 1970, 382); the escape plan that Fyodor Yershov put forward: breaking out the dugout and attacking the guard at night (Anatoli 1970, 382); the conduct and fate of a prisoner whose name is not even known, who, having been caught stealing a pair of scissors, beaten until he lost consciousness, and then thrown into the fire, did not betray his fellows and did not jeopardize their plan to escape (Anatoli 1970, 385). These events appear in a different light in Trubakov's memoir which augments trauma, since he knew those people: among the 12 prisoners executed at random, there was a boy, Senya, who had reunited with his father in the camp. Trubakov recalls how his poor father picked up his son's body and carried it to the oven while crying and murmuring the "Kaddish" and how "after that he didn't speak to anyone, just quietly carried the corpses and constantly looked

back at the burning oven. He seemed to have lost his mind. It was simply impossible to remain sane after all this" (Trubakov 2014, 176). The torture of "the nameless hero," who did not betray them when they were planning their escape and refused to confess what he needed the scissors for, is described in full detail (Trubakov 2014, 195).

Trubakov's view from the inside is parallelled by a *par dehors* image of the whole squadron that Kuznetsov saw in town, recounting that they were called *Figuren* by the Germans who did not regard them seriously as human beings but rather as sordid puppets; at the morning roll-call they would report:

> Three hundred and twenty-five *Figuren* on parade!
> *Figuren* meant what it said – figures, shapes, something which could not be regarded as human beings. That was also a form of humour. (Anatoli 1970, 379)

This was also an expression that Ukrainians had taken over from the SS, recording the outside perception of the "goners."

Kuznetsov and Trubakov mention each other in their texts. Kuznetsov mentions Trubakov's contribution to the spectacular escape of the prisoners from Babi Yar on 29 September 1943: "One of the *Goldsuchern*, Zakhar Trubakov, had the pliers issued to him by the Germans themselves for pulling out teeth – he was entitled to them, so to speak" (1970, 384). He then notes that 15 out of the 330 prisoners, including Trubakov, escaped. Nine of them keep the memory of Babi Yar alive: "[Every year on September 29th they can be seen, with Dina Pronicheva, at Babi Yar, whither many people make their way unofficially to honour the memory of those who perished there.]" (Anatoli 1970, 389). From Trubakov we find out that the exact number of survivors was actually 13, while the exact number of the squadron prisoners was 327 (Trubakov 2014, 223).

Trubakov mentions that "[t]here are very few remaining witnesses to this legendary event, which, over the years, morphed into numerous different versions" and includes Kuznetsov's version among them, adding in brackets that Kuznetsov talked to him "when he collected material about it" (Trubakov 2014, 124). He quotes from Kuznetsov explaining that the Germans called Babi Yar *Baustelle*, which means "construction site" (Trubakov 2014, 166; Anatoli 1970, 383). However, it is uncertain which version of Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* Trubakov quoted from. Most probably he read the censored Soviet edition of Kuznetsov's book, *Babii Yar: Roman-dokument* (1967), which was very popular among Soviet (especially Kiev) Jews. The uncensored version was published in Russia only after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, a year after Trubakov had already emigrated to Israel.

The intertextual encounters and correspondences between the two books show that the two authors achieved their main aims: their mutually supportive

testimonies are acts of bearing witness to the truth of what happened in Babi Yar and to the trauma of survival.

Compelled to speak out, Kuznetsov and Trubakov did their duty and, as "ear-" and "flesh-witnesses," rendered the events of Babi Yar as historically accurately as possible. Their memoirs deny the erasure of proofs that the Nazis sought and take over the role of the photographs that do not exist to attest to the atrocity of Babi Yar.

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