Source Publication

Ornit Barkai*

Past Forward: Holocaust Testimony in Documentary Film

https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2023-0003
Received February 1, 2023; accepted December 18, 2023; published online January 31, 2024

Abstract: This paper addresses the use of oral history sources in my practice of documentary filmmaking as a second-generation Holocaust survivor. It examines how the filmic documentation of oral history sources can reflect aspects of testimony, memory, and postmemory, as they are theorized in the field of Holocaust Studies. In my film "Past Forward: Journeys to Transnistria," I document the challenge of relating an intergenerational and cross-cultural story while preserving historical accuracy. Filmed in Ukraine in 2002, it tells the story of my mother, a child-survivor of the Romanian Holocaust. Through oral testimony, the film captures my mother's survival story as she tells it to me and later to her granddaughter who documents it for a history school project. It then retraces my mother's journey between 1941 and 1944 from her hometown of Dorohoi, Romania to Transnistria as it was called then under German-allied Romanian occupation. Survivor's testimony combined with onsite witness interviews, and an archival military map, were used to trace the story of a little Jewish Romanian girl who survived the journey to Transnistria. Recently available archival sources have further validated her story. It has also contributed to locating the film within the broader context of the Holocaust in Ukraine.

Keywords: Holocaust; memory; testimony; Transnistria; child-survivor; documentary film

1 Introduction

I am a second-generation Holocaust survivor and my paper addresses the use of oral history sources in my documentary filmmaking practice focused on the Holocaust. I examine how the filmic documentation of oral history sources can reflect aspects of testimony, memory, and post-memory theorized in the field of Holocaust Studies. In

***Corresponding author: Ornit Barkai**, Brandeis University Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, Waltham, MA, 02454, USA, E-mail: ornitb@brandeis.edu. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7018-7470

Open Access. © 2023 the author(s), published by De Gruyter on behalf of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

my 2008 film *Past Forward: Journeys to Transnistria* (Barkai 2008), I document the challenge of relating an intergenerational and cross-cultural story while preserving historical accuracy.

My film tells a Holocaust story without showing the Holocaust. Filmed more than 60 years after the event, it documents a memory of which no photos remained. Instead, it embeds the oral testimony of my mother Yona, born Taúbe Mendel (1933–2023), a child-survivor of the Romanian Holocaust, within my own search to document the layers of intergenerational transmissions of Holocaust memories. These memories reverberate across three generations, from my mother to her granddaughter, through the medium of film and my own mediating position as both, daughter and mother. The film documents my mother's childhood as it was told to me, and later, to my daughter who is writing a school project on "My Grandmother's Story." It then retraces my mother's journey between 1941 and 1944 from her hometown of Dorohoi, Romania to Transnistria that is now part of Ukraine but was under German-allied Romanian occupation at that time.

The film embarks on "journeys" to three continents. It begins in Israel, where my mother built her life and where I was born and raised. It then cuts between locations of historic Transnistria, to which Taúbe (meaning *dove* in German and Yiddish) was deported, and the United States, where I now live with my family. It involves four languages: English, Hebrew, Russian, and Ukrainian. These languages cut and intertwine as the respective "journeys" of my mother, my daughter, and myself, develop in parallel. Tracing the historic route of deportations to concentration camps in present-day Ukraine during the Second World War, the film takes its viewers through a cross-generational journey to the suppressed, fragmented underworld of traumatic memories, and looks at the ways they are revealed and echoed in the voices of second and third generations.

Past Forward centers direct testimonies of a child-survivor, supplemented with eyewitnesses and history specialists. It thus attempts to contribute to the recovery of what is sometimes known as "the forgotten Holocaust of Transnistria" (*Geschichtswerkstatt Europa* 2012). Indeed, as Ben-Tsyion claimed in 1989, the Transnistria Holocaust occupies a place outside of popular media coverage and public conversation of Holocaust memorialization. And, this state of affairs largely holds true today.

The film thus offers a firsthand testimony of historical events in the wake of the 1940 pogrom of Dorohoi and subsequent Romanianization laws and anti-Jewish legislation allied with the Nazi regime (Final Report 2004). These developments led to deportations of approximately 185,000 Jews from Dorohoi and surrounding communities, both in Romania proper and in the territories of Bukovina, Moldova and Bessarabia (Yad Vashem, n.d.). Romanian authorities placed the deportees in 112 concentration camps across Romanian-controlled Transnistria.

My filming took place between 1995 and 2002. At that time, most Holocaust film coverage focused on telling the story of the Holocaust (using archival documentation, evidence, and firsthand testimonies), and on bearing witness to survivors' testimonies. Since the time of filming, studies of child-survivors' memories of Holocaust trauma and the voices of second and third generation of Holocaust survivors have gained broader interest and more prominence in public discourse.

In the absence of visual evidence and other documentation, *Past Forward* could only tell a story about telling about the Holocaust, rather than telling the story itself. Accordingly, I relied on memory and visual contexts, both contemporary and associative. My pre-production research focused on themes of survivors' testimony and trauma memory, and I was particularly interested in understanding child-survivors' testimonies. Among the experts I contacted was Dori Laub, a psychiatrist and co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, who was himself a child-survivor of the Transnistria Holocaust. Laub's influential work on Holocaust memory, testimony, and transmission revolves around the intricate dynamics of survivor narratives and their enduring impact. He pioneered the concept of *testimony* as a crucial means of bearing witness to the Holocaust's traumatic legacy, emphasizing the profound importance of survivors recounting their experiences. His work has significantly contributed to our understanding of the lasting effects of Holocaust trauma on survivors, and the broader implications for the study of trauma and collective memory. Delving into the collective memory of trauma and how it is transmitted across generations, Laub's interdisciplinary approach bridges the gap between psychoanalysis, history, and cultural studies. Exploring the role of the witness in bearing testimony to traumatic events in their 1991 book, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman and Laub argued that traditional forms of testimony often fail to capture the full depth and complexity of trauma, and proposed new ways of understanding how traumatic experiences can be conveyed and processed.

Fast forward to 2020, in commemoration of the 80th year of the 1940 pogrom in the northern Romanian town of Dorohoi, I set out to re-examine the events starting on the eve of the pogrom on July 1st. In 2021, renewed research interests prompted by the approaching 80th anniversary of Operation Barbarossa and the Holocaust in Romania led me to revisit the film for a closer examination of documented sources in the Romanian archives. Information was obtained by researching contemporaneous press and media coverage, including embedded journalistic reports from the front by Axis press (Malaparte 1941) and Nazi propaganda film (Bundesarchiv 1941). Both sources track the military advances of the German and Romanian forces in their war against the Soviet Red Army, and report on the destruction along the routes of mass deportations of Jews from Romania to Transnistria.

2 Documenting Testimony

The story of my mother's family, the Mendel family, belongs to the history of Romanian Jews in Dorohoi and the surrounding communities across Bukovina, Bessarabia, Moldova, as well as in Ukraine and Russia (Ben-Tsyion and Shmuel 1989). The film bears witness to the experiences of a Jewish family from Dorohoi, Romania between 1940 and 1946. It connects these experiences with anecdotal testimonies by Ukrainian witnesses, and with the transfer of memory across generations of my own family, to provide a nuanced perspective on historical interpretation. It does so by creating a cinematic collage of vistas, testimonies, and memory contexts.

Asked about her childhood, my mother tells her granddaughter that she does not remember any antisemitism until July 1, 1940, when *"everything changed."* Then six-years old, she remembers that summer day when mothers started calling their children home in panic. She remembers her neighbors, a German family, pointing, *"there, there is the Jews' house,"* directing the Romanian soldiers to her family home. And she remembers witnessing the murder of her 80-year-old grandfather as he was shot in the back by the soldiers, falling dead into a dried-out stream on the side of the road.

Additional archival data about Dorohoi that emerged in recent years, re-frames the memory of the little girl, Taúbe, who witnessed the pogrom. Following my 2021 conversation with Romanian historian Adrian Cioflânca (Cioflâncã 2021), I discovered my great grandfather's name on the official list of victims of the pogrom. Herscu Mendel is one of the 57 listed victims, though Jewish community records claim close to 200 victims buried in a mass grave.

A week after the pogrom, a short item appeared in the Hebrew daily newspaper *Haaretz* in Mandatory Palestine, reporting "*[d]ozens killed and hundreds wounded among Romanian Jews in pogrom-like clashes in Dorohoi.*" In another news item at the top of page 8, the Italian and German press welcomed the newly elected, totalitarian, antisemitic government in Romania.

Under mounting new legislations (Final Report 2004), family businesses were confiscated, and their economic situation worsened. Additional laws mandated the exclusion of Jewish students and teachers in Romanian schools. And so, Taúbe Mendel, the little girl who had already been enrolled to start first grade, remembers not being allowed to go to school. Within months, she lost both her parents, and her childhood home was taken over by the neighbors.

My mother with her two older sisters and uncle were among the 3074 Dorohoi Jews who, on November 12 and 13, 1941, were deported to Transnistria at the orders of Romanian authorities (Ben-Tsyion and Shmuel 1989). Taúbe was on the second transport that left Dorohoi's train station on November 13, 1941. She had just turned

seven. *"They were promised a better life in the new place,"* the granddaughter narrates her grandmother's recollection of the deportation.

Thus, my film *Past Forward* is the story of three women of one family: my mother, a Holocaust child-survivor, and myself, her daughter who documents her wartime story, and my daughter, whose childhood is juxtaposed against my mother's. Throughout the filming, my daughter was the same age as my mother was at the time of the war. Childhood memories, co-narrated by grandmother and granddaughter, entwine and overlap with the survival story. On a secondary level, the film features parallel testimonies of Ukrainian women. The elderly women in the rural villages of former Transnistria recall the Romanian Jewish deportees who were forced into their villages by the Romanian army under the Nazi regime.

"Was *it painful for you when I asked?*" I open the film with a blunt question. My mother responds to me, her daughter/director, saying that she did not mind, and was actually glad, that I asked her about her childhood. My question was about her letting me bear witness to her story, and to her memory. This was not the first time I participated through listening, in her wartime recollections (Felman-Laub 1991). It was the first time, however, that I learned how she felt about sharing her childhood trauma with me. Self-identified as a "bearer of the seal," a term coined for second-generation Holocaust survivors (Vardi 1990), I remember as a child how I asked my mother to share with me her memories, usually around Israel's Day of Holocaust Remembrance, when Holocaust stories became the focus of public attention for one day.

Employing two Hebrew homophones, the word *journey* becomes layered with different contexts: *Massah* spelled מסע means a journey, while when spelled משא, it means heavy load or burden. It is the memories of the journey that become the load carried by the passenger. The film's title suggests numerous journeys taken by different people and hints at the different burdens borne in each journey - the girl on the train to Transnistria, the girl (her daughter), as a child, on a train along the Israeli coastline, and the girl (her granddaughter), whose reflection appears on the window of the Ukrainian train going to historic Transnistria, 60 years later. Also joining the cinematic journey are impromptu cross-generational encounters with Ukrainian witnesses to the legacy of the Transnistria Holocaust.

From this point on, the film embarks on a fast-paced journey into memory as it takes the viewers through my mother's journey to Transnistria and through my own journey, visually as well as figuratively, into her memory.

3 Documenting Memory

"My mother doesn't have any childhood photos… At least none were left." With no visuals and little archival documentation, the film bears witness to memory by

revisiting the undocumented remains of the Transnistria Holocaust along the routes of deportation. Layered together, sometimes offering contrasting versions, the film makes no attempt to verify or correct any discrepancies relating to certain locations or events.

For example, Avraham Kaplan, the president of the Moghilev Jewish community insisted that the deportees crossed the Dniester River by foot over the bridge, while according to my mother's account they crossed "*in a raft, or some small vessel.*" While she remembers people drowning in the process, Kaplan states that "*those who died were thrown by the soldiers off the bridge into the water*."

Laub, recalling his own experience as a child-survivor, defines his role as a witness to the trauma and to himself (Laub 2002). Addressing the issue of testimony and historical truth, he explains how survivors' testimony is by itself the historical truth and own validation of surviving an inconceivable trauma.

And so, sixty years later, the film presents side-by-side the vivid memory of a child-survivor and a slightly different testimony regarding a certain fact of the same event – the journey to Transnistria across the Dniester River. Newly available survivor's testimony (Ackerfeld 2005), referring to the same bridge over the Dniester at that crossing point to Moghilev Podolsky, specifies that by late-October 1941 "*the only way across was by boat*" since "*the bridges connecting Bessarabia with the Ukraine were bombed by the Soviet army*."

Referring to the impact of testimony in Langer's work, Laub distinguishes between two types of testimony: "[t]estimony through a witness" and "self-testimony." He gives as example Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo's work on representation and transmission, telling me on camera that *"[a]s a writer she could choose and add what she wanted to have on paper. In the actual narration it's more fragmented, it's also more powerful… Somebody who writes doesn't live the experience with the same immediacy as somebody who tells it to a witness, and therefore the testimony has additional dimensions to acquiring the past."* [1]

Hunger, one of the key elements of survivors' trauma, is remembered by the child-survivor as she tells her story on camera. Dire state of starvation, circumstantial, intentional or systematic, has driven the younger children to beg local peasants for food, and look for scraps in the trash. Unlike her older sisters, having been too young for forced labor, Taúbe has become one of those food-begging children.

Food, lack of it, or the promise of it, is mentioned repeatedly by the survivor and the witnesses: a piece of bread, an apple, potato peels, any scraps from the trash. In the village of Kopystyryn, bread and milk, which were presumably given by a village

1 Laub, 2002, filmed interview with author.

woman to the Jewish girls who took shelter at her house, are not recalled at all by my mother. *"No one ever gave us any food,"* she remembers.

As the filmmaker, I mostly remained behind the camera. I chose to employ a direct, raw camera style, making the camera an extension of the little girl whose story is retold. And so, when the camera shakes while filming on bumpy roads, the footage imitates the lived experience of the events, recreating an ambiance of chaos and instability.

My cinematic approach highlights the intergenerational transmission of memory. The parallel between my mother and daughter is demonstrated throughout the film by the immediate similarities between them in age, gender, physical traits and mutual intellectual passions, such as writing diaries and poems. Juxtaposing my mother's early memories and her granddaughter's childhood anecdotes instantly brings the past forward.

My mother's recollections of enduring the chaos, terror and constant fear are fragmented, dissociated, and often barely audible. Emotionally numb, it is the memory of the death of her mother, and later her uncle, that chokes her throat and brings tears to her eyes. When I ask her more specifically about the circumstances of her uncle's death in the Shargorod ghetto, she pauses, then chokes. As she relives the memory, her voice whispers as she mouths the words, *"I … don't remember … "* and her eyes well up with tears and pain. The handheld camera captures an intimate and tender moment. Still rolling, the camera points aimlessly at her direction as I freeze, conflicted between my immediate urge as her daughter to console and comfort her, and my directorial commitment to capture her pain on film.

My mother's journey to Transnistria continued with nearly two years of internment in the small rural village of Capusterna, as it was named by Romania during the war, now Kopystyryn, its Ukrainian name. Her fragmented memories include a crammed kolkhoz pigsty at the edge of a forest outside of the village and an old woman's house where she and her older sisters stayed. Just barely old enough for forced labor, her sisters had to knit socks for the soldiers, while she, the youngest (by then eight or nine years old) wandered around the village in search for food scraps.

With no one to take care of them, the three sisters stuck together throughout the years of the war, with the eldest assuming the care-giving role. Citing Krell (1985), Laub suggested that secured parental attachment was one of the most significant factors in enabling resiliency among child-survivors.

As my mother speaks of her fear of the vicious, barking dogs some villagers would release to scare her away, she recalls the desperation and humiliation of collecting food scraps to survive. She recalls two village women who offered to adopt her because of her Aryan looks. Then she revives the memory of the temptation of shelter, food and warmth with strangers who supposedly offered to make her one of their own: one woman promised her the warmest spot in the house by the fireplace

and the other told her she would tell everyone that she was her niece from a nearby village. My mother prides herself for refusing that temptation upon hearing that *"they will not let her reunite with her sisters if, and when the war will be over, and the Jews would be allowed to return to Romania."*

Some sixty years later, from a safe distance of time and place, my mother adds quietly that *"perhaps not all of them were bad,"* referring to the local, non-Jewish residents of the village.

4 Documenting Post-Memory

The kernel of the film was a single snapshot of my six-year-old daughter boarding a bus on her first day to school. This captured moment, as she is hesitantly looking back at me, sparked the idea of cross-generational journeys to explore the transmission of the Holocaust story as told, and retold by my mother to me, and years later to my daughter, and then was traced and re-captured in film on our joint journey to Ukraine in 2002.

"It was already autumn … I was supposed to start first grade," recalls my mother quietly. Imagery of my daughter boarding a yellow school bus on the way to her much-anticipated first day of school fills the screen, juxtaposed against the audible memory of her grandmother, who, in the fall of 1941, instead of starting school, was forced onto a freight train on the long, horrific journey to Transnistria. The yellow bus transforms into speeding train freight cars, the asphalt road stretches into gleaming railroad tracks, dissolving into images of people in a rural Ukrainian station rushing to board the train with their suitcases and assorted luggage. My daughter's reflection then appears on the train's window, captured during her journey to Transnistria to trace her grandmother's story. For a fleeting moment, she is instantly placed inside my mother's fragmented memory of her traumatic train ride to Transnistria.

The train memory is central to the film's "journeys" theme. Yet, it takes a uniquely personal dimension as I narrate on camera a poem I wrote about my own happy childhood memory of a train ride along the Israeli coastline to the northern kibbutz where I was born. My early train memories are bright, colorful and exciting; rich with visual references to the landscape where the train travels between the Mediterranean coast on one side, and small houses surrounded by orange groves on the other side.

My recollection of an old sign warning passengers not to lean out of the train's window is introduced in the poem as being *"tattooed onto the windowsill's forearm."* While not shown on screen, these adopted memory fragments are re-introduced through my self-narration of the poem. In the film, I overlay my happy "train

memory" with contemporary footage of passing freight trains and old rusted cattle cars captured on my "journey to Transnistria."

"It was already winter" my mother recalls the first days of her deportation. *"It was cold, we were marched for days and nights, and I remember seeing … snow that was red … "*

Her voice trails off, barely audible, *" … and when I asked, they told me it was red from the blood of the dead Jews who were left unburied on the side of the road."*

In the course of the violent events leading to the Transnistria concentration camps, the little girl lost everything she knew and loved – her family, her home and her childhood. Sixty years later, as captured in the film, her granddaughter in a classically choreographed ballet, embarked on her stage journey as Little Red Riding Hood – a solo role in which she parts from her stage "mother" and is chased by the "evil wolf" into the "dark forest." The film introduces three short segments from this ballet adaptation of the *Little Red Riding Hood* fairytale. Following the classic fairytale format, it suggests immediate parallels – from innocence and sheltering family love, through conflict, fear and loss, to the predicted "happy end" resolution when the heroine reunites with her grandmother and mother.

The red color appears throughout the film as a link between different memories. The memory of "red snow" transforms to the red cape Little Red Riding Hood wears as she pirouettes on stage, providing a poignant analogue to her grandmother's experience.

In another scene, wearing a red hat and gloves, the granddaughter cheerfully throws snowballs at her younger brother and makes snow angels, recreating the visual of her grandmother's morbid recollections of "red snow." Forgotten in the snow at the end of the day, her red glove slowly bleeds red hues into the white snow. Additional visual reinforcement of the red color in conjunction with childhood innocence is represented on screen in random encounters with little girls in Ukraine, coincidentally wearing red.

The red color motif comes full circle as the film draws to a close. At the end of the war, my mother and her sisters, with other child-survivors, were brought back from Transnistria to an orphanage in Romania. On stage, the ballet of the Grimm Brothers' fairytale concludes with a happy ending when my daughter, as Little Red Riding Hood, reunites with her "mother" on stage.

Rebuilding her life in Israel after the war, my mother is smiling in the many photographs she has accumulated since. In one of the photos taken in her new home in Israel, she is holding wild anemones she picked in the field, and a flower crown on her head. On screen, red color gradually fills up the petals of the flowers in her hands and around her long hair.

"Spell 'Maz-KEH-ret' (Memento)," suggests my mother to my daughter, encouraging her to spell Hebrew words on her English-Hebrew digital translator. As a

former schoolteacher, my mother takes pleasure in playing Hebrew word games with her granddaughter as a way to bridge the cultural gap with her US-born and raised granddaughter. At the crowded international flights terminal in Boston, waiting for her plane back home to Israel, my mother chooses to bid farewell by selecting the Hebrew word that shares a common root with *memory*, *memorialize*, and *to remember*, suggesting her inner conflicts about saying goodbye.

5 Landscapes of Memory

Past Forward relies on one child-survivor's memory. When I asked Laub about his own memory of Transnistria's landscapes, before I traveled to film in Ukraine, he had said: *"You are going to see rivers, and if it's summer time, you are going to see lush meadows, and it's going to be probably not too impressive, it's just regular, quaint countryside. And rivers still continue flowing, and there is this rustle of leaves and water, and as if nothing happened …"*

5.1 The Journey to Transnistria

Reporting from the front, the Italian journalist Curzio Malaparte embedded with the Axis forces describes the routes to Transnistria on August 4, 1941:

> "Here is the Dniester. Here is the Dniester, in the narrow, open valley, with its sides of hard clay flanked by white wrinkles and red crevasses. On the edge of the Ukrainian shore in the green of corn, in the gold of wheat, in the acacia trees and in the thick of the sunflowers and soybeans fields, there is the iron and concrete labyrinth of the 'Stalin line'."

The second transport of Dorohoi Jews is yet to cross the Dniester. By that time, Malaparte's journey to Transnistria would come to an end shortly thereafter. He was expelled from the Ukrainian Front due to his controversial reporting and censorship conflicts.

5.2 Transnistria, Beyond the Dniester

Little documentation exists in the Ukrainian State Archive in Vinnitsa about the Transnistria Holocaust. In the words of archive director Faina Vinokurova: *"the main source of investigation of the Transnistria Holocaust is the Romanian map."* The 1943 military map depicts the routes of deportation of the Romanian Jews.

Tracing my mother's memory of deportation, we started in Moghilev Podolsky, on the western bank of the Dniester River, continued northeast through the small town of Shargorod and ended in the rural village of Kopystyryn – all were part of Romanian wartime-controlled Transnistria.

5.3 Moghilev Podolsky

Moghilev was the first stop for the second transport of Dorohoi Jews on their route to Transnistria in mid-November 1941. Kaplan, a Red Army veteran, who dedicated his life to the memorialization of the Transnistria Holocaust in the surrounding communities, shares his expertise in the film. Jewish life during the Holocaust era in Moghilev and Transnistria is memorialized in the photos and religious artifacts on display throughout the community building at the center of town.

After presenting the chronology of the events in Moghilev under Nazi occupation with visual aids, he led us to the border point along the river, where according to his testimony, the deported Jews from Romania had crossed the bridge. A small plaque at Moghilev's central bus station marks the entrance of the former Jewish ghetto in what used to be Soviet army barracks before the Nazi occupation.

Another plaque on the wall of a deserted warehouse marks the Selection and Transfer Center, the first stop for the Romanian deportees before being forced further to concentration camps throughout Transnistria. The dead were buried in an unmarked mass grave near that building, and those who were forced to stay in the town ghetto and died, were buried in a section dedicated for the Romanian Jews in the now deserted old Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of Moghilev.

5.4 Death Marches

Filming in 2002, there are only few traceable marks to the events and locations of the Romanian Holocaust in Transnistria. Survivors' memory is often the only source of information about one's experience. On the film's journey to Transnistria, while the audio captures the child-survivor's memory of the forced march to Shargorod, the video captures the actual route.

Survivors' testimonies indicate the numerous deaths amongst the Romanian Jewish deportees who died during the forced marches to Transnistria's concentration camps. As we drove from Moghilev towards Shargorod, we stopped in the small village of Skazintsy, where at the side of the road along route P36, in a wildflower meadow, stood a stone monument. Translating the Ukrainian text, our translator reads the plaque: *"This memorial was built thanks to contributions by the Jews of*

Moghilev Podolsky and the villagers of Skazintsy in memory of the Jews who perished here between 1941 and 1943. Thousands of Jews from Moghilev Podolsky, Bukovina and Bessarabia, who were annihilated by the fascist invaders." In 2002 post-Soviet Ukraine, Nazis were still called "fascist invaders" and the Second World War was still referred to as "The Great Patriotic War".

5.5 Shargorod

For the little girl, her two older sisters and uncle, and for the other Jews on the second transport from Dorohoi, Shargorod was the next stop on their journey to Transnistria. The medieval fortress-like synagogue turned into a ghetto for the local Shargorod Jews. The Romanian Jews were placed in a vacant school building near the market square, *"dozens, maybe hundreds of people on the floor, crammed inside"* as my mother recalls. The winter of 1941 was remembered as extremely cold by survivors and locals. So cold, that women at the Shargorod farmers market who took pity on the convoy of Romanian Jews from Dorohoi that arrived on November 16, appealed to the mayor to let them stay in town over the harsh winter (Ben-Tsyion 1989).

5.6 Kapustyane

Our next stop was a village called Kapustyane. Earlier, identifying and coordinating filming locations at Vinnitsa's National State Archive, I was asked about my destinations of interest in historic Transnistria. My reply *"Moghilev, Shargorod, Capusterna"* was simultaneously translated as *"Moghilev, Shargorod, Kapustyane."* So, with our translator Tanya, and a map of Ukraine, we traveled to a village called Kapustyane in search of the place where my mother, her two older sisters and about 200 other Romanian Jews were transferred from Shargorod in the spring of 1942.

At the Village Council Hall, we are told of four remaining witnesses *"all in their nineties, who could tell us what happened."* We ended up meeting two sisters. 94-year-old Nadia does not remember much about the Romanian Jews, saying that they did not come to her to beg for food. Nadia therefore sent us to her 96-year-old sister Ustena *"who may remember more."*

Khlib, bread in Ukrainian, is the most profound wartime related memory for Ustena. On camera, surrounded by four generations of her family, she recalls baking a fresh loaf of bread every Sunday for a Romanian Jewish family that stayed at what used to be the kolkhoz sugar beet factory in the village. *"She is old, she is nearly deaf,*

and she doesn't remember much else," translates Tanya. Her 75-year-old son Apolinary takes us to the deserted sugar beet factory turned into ghetto during the war, recalling a Jewish boy he befriended. Asked what the children did in those days, he replies *"They were shepherds."* As we depart, we receive a traditional poppy bread their family baked in preparation for the approaching celebrations of Ukraine's 10th year of independence. And I realize that Ustena must have been a young mother in her 20s during the Holodomor, when the Soviet enforced collectivization policies led to the man-made starvation and extermination of close to four million Ukrainians in 1932–1933.

We realized after filming in Kapustyane, that Kapustyane had been mistakenly confused by our translator with the somewhat similar sounding Capusterna, the Romanian name for Kopystyryn during their occupation of Transnistria.

5.7 Kopystyryn

Our journey to Transnistria comes to an end in the village of Kopystyryn, nestled amidst hilly forests and sunflower fields north of Shargorod. We arrive in Kopystyryn in search of Capusterna as it was called in Romanian during the war. The massive rainfall at the time of our visit, caused excessive flooding throughout the region, which severely limited our access driving through the unpaved roads in the area. We were hoping to find the kolkhoz pigsty my mother remembers staying in, the colorful houses with a yellow painted gate or a green door, or other color-coded signs that guided the little girl to find houses where people gave her some food and avoid houses where people released their dogs to chase her away.

When we arrive, the mayor welcomes us by the monument for *"The Fellow Villagers Who Fell in the Second World War."* He introduces us to our local guide – Mikhail, a retired history teacher and war veteran who joined the local partisans at the age of 14. Taking upon himself the documentation of life in Kopystyryn during the war, he collected oral testimonies regarding the Romanian occupation. Among the testimonies are stories of villagers who, under Romanian control, were ordered to house Romanian Jewish deportees as forced labor.

Upon hearing the surname Mendel, Mikhail mentions an old woman by the surname Kalinovska that had in her home about 10 or 12 Romanian Jews who were forced laborers, among them *"at least one, or two girls by the surname Mendel."* Revealing that Kalinovska was his wife's late aunt, he turned out to be a witness who connected the dots in my mother's story. Being too young for work, Taúbe, the eight-year-old and youngest of the three Mendel sisters, was left out of Kopystyryn's recorded testimony and memory.

On the way to Kalinovska's house, the unpaved roads are flooded, and our interpreter Tanya stays in the van, while we follow Mikhail on foot in the rain and deep mud. We cut through the yard of an old woman living in a small house with a picket-fence yard, filled with fruit trees, flowers, geese and a dog. There, with no English translator onsite, I was not able to tell what the old woman was saying to me. She smiled and seemed friendly, yet at the same time she was also talking in a harsh voice – apparently trying to hush her dog, which was barking violently at us:

> "-Good day!
>
> -Good day! Thank you, my cranes, for filming the house… Walk from here. I don't want my geese to get out of the yard. Thank you! Thank you, my cranes, my forgotten children… Let me kiss you… Quiet! Quiet!"

In post-translation I learned that she spoke in an extinct Ukrainian dialect of the rural villages in this region. I was astonished to learn that while thanking us warmly for filming Kalinovska's house, she also addressed us – visibly emotional, with tears welled in her eyes – as her long-forgotten children, the *lost cranes* who finally returned. Then, I learned of the cultural significance of cranes in Ukrainian folklore, symbolizing the souls of fallen soldiers who return every spring. The filmmaker in me finally found my mother's haunting memory of *"scary dogs"* in that chaotic scene. The daughter in me mysteriously transformed into the *"forgotten child"* of the old woman from Kopystyryn.

Going to see Kalinovska's house we navigated through the muddy roadways of the village where we crossed paths with a young girl. Blonde, blue eyed and barefoot, she instantly transforms to become the young Jewish girl from Romania who *"looked like them"* and may have once walked down the same path in the rain, desperate to find food scraps. Decades later, when my daughter passes by that girl and the camera locks their images for a brief moment, there occurs a most surreal juncture of distant memory.

A heap of piled up stones and the weathered remains of a rustic wood rail fence are all that was left of Kalinovska's house, now in a deserted part of the village.

5.8 Werewolf, Eastern Front Command Bunker

My filming in 2002 was coordinated with the support of the Jewish community center in Vinnitsa. Situated on the banks of the Bug River in central Ukraine, Vinnitsa is the administrative center of Vinnitsa province which includes the region called Transnistria under German control.

Six decades after the Second World War in post-Soviet Ukraine, the concrete ruins of Werewolf, Hitler's Eastern Front military headquarters still stand abandoned in the forest on the outskirts of the city. Leaving Vinnitsa on the way back to Kyiv, driving through the site on a dark rainy night, it looked chillingly haunting.

6 Summary

Today, there are barely any traceable marks to the events or locations of the "Forgotten Holocaust of Transnistria," except for the memories in the survivors and witnesses' mind.

In the film, migrating birds cutting swiftly across the frame mark the change of time and seasons, and the end of the war. For 10-year-old Taúbe – whose name means *dove* in reference to the bird released by Noah, whose delivery of an olive branch signaled the abatement of God's fury expressed in the Biblical Flood, and now a traditional symbol of peace – the end of the war meant going back home to Dorohoi, and signified the end of a nightmarish trauma. Exploring once again visual motifs of transition, the sight of migrating birds may evoke excitement and longing to faraway places, yet it is also rooted in Ukrainian culture as a poignant icon for beloved family members who passed away and for fallen soldiers whose souls come back every spring in the form of the migrating cranes.

For my mother, going *"home"* to Dorohoi was enabled when the Jewish community organized a transfer of young Jewish orphans back to Romania. She was one of 1846 orphans under the age of 15 out of the 4600 orphans listed by the Red Cross, allowed by the Romanian government to repatriate (Ben-Tsyion 1989). In March 1944, Taúbe found herself back at the same train station she left in 1941.

In 1946, at the age of 12, my mother arrived *"home"* to pre-state Israel where she was able to rebuild her life. Styled shots of desert landscapes and brief reflections of my camera and of my daughter in the car's side mirror signal the final transition in the film, titled *"Going Home"*. The quick montage of desert vistas from the car window suggests another intergenerational journey and reunion at my mother's home in a southern town in Israel. Cutting to a jubilee reunion of the Transnistria orphans' group, my mother reads aloud a poem she wrote about their long journey from the concentration camps of Transnistria to their *"safe haven"* and final destination in Israel.

The next scene of the film closes a circle of another intergenerational experience. On her granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah, my mother authored a poem for this special occasion, which I read to my daughter in Hebrew as the family is gathered around the dining-room table for a decorated birthday cake. And, on camera for the

first time, I am now both the daughter and mother, as well as the filmmaker documenting the intricate layers of cross-generational transmission of childhood memories, bringing the past forward.

In the final scene, the film's epilogue concludes with a fast-moving montage of the many photos of my mother taken after the war: first in the Jewish orphanage in Romania, then as a typical Israeli youth on her Kibbutz by the Sea of Galilee, and finally as a young mother holding me in her arms, closing the circle, beginning a new journey.

The film's witness testimonies allow viewers to bear witness with me. My indirect presence, through my handheld camera, makes me an intermediary for both the witness and the viewer. And thus, enables me to create cinematically what Laub called *"holding frames"* that will help contain the experience, and assume the role of *"human intermediary that attenuates the testimony"* for the viewer.[2]

Discussing the role of documentary film in the transmission of memory, social anthropologist Roxana Waterson said, "films of memory are part of the struggle against the forgetting of past injustices, and ultimately have the potential to contribute to shifts in our interpretations of history" (Waterson 2007).

When I asked Laub about my role as a filmmaker, he said, "I think it is the power of the filmmaker and the presence of the filmmaker and the non-avoidance of the filmmaker that can set a narrative in motion of people who are not even willing to tell to find themselves all of a sudden speaking." Through my own journey to Transnistria, I am present not only as a mother, and as the daughter of a child-survivor of the Transnistria Holocaust, but also as the filmmaker bearing witness to memory, bringing the past forward for the sake of next generations.

References

Ackerfeld, Lance. 2005. "Survive and Tell." Testimony Manuscript. Hebrew Translation and Webpage Version. JewishGen Yizkor Book Project. www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lipkany/lip001.html.

Barkai, Ornit. 2008. *Past Forward: Journeys to Transnistria*. Directed by Ornit barkai, Tinro|Media Works.

Ben-Tsyion, Shmuel. 1989. *Jewish Children in Transnistria during the Holocaust*, Holocaust Research Institute, Haifa University.

Cioflâncă, Adrian. 2021. *Personal Interview*. By phone: Ornit Barkai.

Shoshana Felman, and M. D. Dori Laub. 1991. *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Routledge.

Geschichtswerkstatt Europa. 2012. *Transnistria—The Forgotten Holocaust, 1941 to 1944. Chișinău (Moldova) and Odessa (Ukraine)*.

Final Report/International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania; president of the commission: Elie Wiesel; ed. Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, Mihail E. Ionescu. – Iasi: Polirom, 2004.

2 Laub, 2002, filmed interview with author.

Krell, Robert. 1985. "Child Survivors of the Holocaust: 40 Years Later Introduction." *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry* 24 (4): 378–80.

Laub, Dori. 2002. *Personal Interview*. New Haven: Ornit Barkai.

Malaparte, Curzio. 1941. Corriere della Sera daily newspaper.

Vardi, Dina. 1990. *Bearers of the Seal: A Dialog with Second Generation Holocaust Survivors. (Hebrew)*. Jerusalem: Keter.

Waterson, Roxana. 2007. *Trajectories of Memory: Documentary Film and the Transmission of Testimony*, Vol. 18, 1st ed., 51–73. London: Taylor & Francis.