Memory in an Amnesic World:

Holocaust, Exile and the Return of the Suppressed

All memory is individual, unreproducible--it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds (Susan Sontag 2003:86).

Forgetting makes us robust...Those who can't forget we call madmen or artists (Nicolas Spice 1/8/1904:ll).

Was this a real scene? Or was it a fiction that my well-intentioned and good-natured memory had made up on the spot to console a broken man like me? (Orhan Pamuk 1998:267).

Introduction

Being human, we are able to remember as well as to forget. In this essay, I want to argue that we cannot act without memory, nor can we understand ourselves unless we understand our own past. As anthropologists, we cannot hope to understand people's behavior without knowing their past histories, both objectively and as they themselves tell it. And yet, the extent to which it is possible to understand others is, at best, limited. The greater the social, cultural, and linguistic distance, the greater the limitations are likely to be. Marie Antoinette's apocryphal "Let them eat cake!" may serve as the iconic example. According to this tale, when the queen was told that the people of Paris were
rioting because they had no bread, she had no understanding of what that meant. Even the translation of the story as told in English is a distortion: she said "brioche," which is not the same as "cake," yet there is no exact equivalent.

The subject that concerns us here is the Holocaust and our relation to it, as individuals and as members of families who have experienced that period in history. Should we remember? Is it good, is it healthy, to do so? Is it better, is it possible, to forget and to move on? Margalit (2002) speaks of an "ethics of memory," linking remembering to caring, yet he questions the cathartic, healing quality of memory and suggests that memory often "breathes revenge." Why do we want to remember, or to forget? And why do we want to talk about it? The answers are neither obvious nor simple.

Our capacity both to remember and to share our memories with others is distinctively human, since it involves the use of language and of other complex symbolic representations. The tension between our contradictory desires to remember and to forget, that too is distinctively human. The sharing of memories in a community, in a collectivity, leads to the construction of "collective memory." This, in turn, reinforces the sense of identity among the members of such collectivities. Susan Sontag, cited above, speaks of the role of photography, of the visual record, in the creation of "collective memory," stressing the selective aspect of the process of establishing such a visual record. Memorials, monuments, pilgrimages, reenactments and other concrete and ritual means serve to structure, maintain and reinforce collective memory.

A striking example of reenactment of a historic event in the interest of collective memory was the recent celebration of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Paris by
Free French troops under the leadership of General Leclerc and General De Gaulle, with the cooperation of the French Resistance. As broadcast world-wide, it was a matter of great emotion to survivors and clearly was intended to teach younger people about their past as the organizers of the event wanted them to see it and remember it. American viewers noted the omission of the role played by General Eisenhower and the American Army, yet they too were selective, for they did not mention the participation of other allied armies.

Another recent example is the race from Marathon to Athens that occurred during the Athens Olympiade of 2004. This was more than a sports event. As a historic reenactment of the Greek victory over the Persians at Marathon in 490 BCE, it highlighted Greek history and pride, fixing it in not only in Greek, but also in global collective memory.

In spite of (often selective) memory work, we also have efforts at silencing, forgetting, repressing, suppressing, and denial. This is especially true of a cruel and ultimately incomprehensible past. Although each person's memories are unique, collective memory, with its selection of what is important, lends itself to myth building. In the following pages, I wish to consider examples of collective memory work as well as some personal memories, and, true to anthropology's comparative perspective, reflect on specific instances of the manipulation of collective memory, on myth making, as well as on the transformation of memory and myth into mythic history.

**Forms of Remembering**

Bringing the past into the present requires information, information drawn from memory--one's own or that of others--transmitted in many forms: oral or written texts,
photographs, mementos, and more. How do we understand this material in terms of the present, in terms of *what we are now*, providing a context, both historic and personal, a context that we couldn't have known or understood then, even if we were there. For many of us who have written about these things, it means the experience of life when we were young. Yet the urge to remember, to fight against oblivion, is in conflict with the urge to forget, to go on living.

In recent years, there has been an unprecedented effort to collect and preserve information to document the Holocaust and its consequences. Notably, Stephen Spielberg's Shoah Foundation (Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation) has completed 51,710 interviews with survivors. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is conducting interviews before the remaining survivors are gone. Yale University's Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies contains 14,000 accounts. There are numerous other such projects, of varying scopes.

These collections, however, represent only a first step: how are such masses of materials to be analyzed and what generalizations can be drawn from them? The problem exists even in the case of smaller enterprises. Laqueur's book *Generation Exodus* (2001), defining a more limited scope, deals with Jews born in Germany and Austria between 1914 and 1926,—a cohort to which both the author and I belong. Members of this cohort emigrated before the major killing started. Old enough to remember their lives before they emigrated, they were young enough to make a start in their new countries. Although this "generation" did not experience the worst of the events—or perhaps because of that---it is the one that has published the largest number of memoirs, which Laqueur(1999) estimated at some 2,000, a number that has continued to grow. Most of this cohort are
now in their 80's. Their concern with putting their memories on record is in contrast to the apparent failure to do so by members of their parents' generation. Yet a few of that generation did write; some of their work has been published privately, or posthumously, or survived only in manuscript form, whether in public or private archives. Most, it seems, were too busy adapting, making a living, attempting not to remember.

The Laqueur volume belongs to a secondary literature that attempts to sketch a broad picture on the basis of multiple sources, and to draw some conclusions. Another recent example of this secondary literature is Eichenberg's (2004) *Zwischen Erfahrung und Erfindung: Jüdische Lebensentwürfe nach der Shoah* [Between Experience and Invention: Sketches of Jewish Life after the Shoah]. Like *Generation Exile*, this volume deals with both published and archival materials concerning the experiences of Jewish survivors. However, the individuals whose accounts are included were of different countries, languages and generations. Eichenberg's emphasis, in contrast to Laqueur's, is on the relationship between memory and the author's situatedness. He attends to differences among his sources with regard to who they are and the context of their telling. Anthropologists have long been aware of the importance of situating both authors and informants (see Bennett [1998/1946] on the influence of ethnographers' values on the interpretation of data).

There is a continuous proliferation of publications, new histories, memoirs, and secondary studies, in numerous languages, notably German, Hebrew, Polish, French, and Russian. One recent example is Zapruder's (2004) effort to collect and edit the diaries of young writers who experienced the Holocaust. Only a fraction of this material has been translated into English. Many of these publications are the memoirs of the next
generation, children or grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. The work of the other three authors of this collection is based on interviews with a surviving parent. It is instructive how much these accounts differ, for the parent in question in each case was and is differently situated, whether man or woman, Jew or non-Jew, Polish or French, and so forth. Epstein (1997), in her book Where She Came From, sought to learn about her mother's life from documents. Eva Hoffmann (1989), on the other hand, speaks of her own life as the child of hidden Holocaust survivors. She describes their move from Poland first to Canada and then the United States, focusing on the complexities of learning a new culture and a new language, on growing up in an environment foreign to that of her parents. Since that time, she has worked systematically on understanding the history of Jews in Poland. A final example is that of Maus, Spiegelman’s (1989) attempt to render his father's story in the medium of the comic strip.

Other children of survivors have turned to scholarship, rather than personal history. The historian Marion Kaplan (1998), daughter of Jewish refugees from Germany, has studied Jewish life in Nazi Germany; the literary scholar Ronit Lentin (2000) considers fiction by Israeli women writers, who are daughters of survivors.

Members of the so-called "Generation Exodus," which is my own, are situated chronologically between the Holocaust victims and survivors and their children. I have a story of my own, but in working with the memoir of my father's sister, my aunt Bronka Schneider (Bourguignon and Rigney, eds., 1989), I too have addressed the experience of members of my parents' generation. It seems that, after all, these distinctions are not quite as neat as they look at first blush.

Some accounts appear in the form of novels and fiction films. These raise other
questions. When is an autobiographic account a novel? Lore Segal (1964) labels her book, *Other People's Houses*, a novel because, she says, she makes use of dialog, but the issue is surely more complex. A novel gives the author greater freedom and leaves the reader in doubt as to what did or did not actually happen, but without a basis for questioning the authenticity of what is claimed. Just what is or is not a novel is a matter of discussion among literary critics and historians. Works identified by their authors as such may be experience-near, or experience-distant, and some combine the two perspectives. Kiš (1972/1990) bases his novel *Hourglass* on a letter written by his father in wartime Yugoslavia. Perec's (1975/1998) remarkable and difficult book *W or the Memory of Childhood*, is identified in French not as a novel, but a récit, an "account" or "narration." It consists of alternating chapters, one set presenting small fragments of childhood memory, the other a frightening fictive world. Lejeune (1993), tracing the genesis and development of the book, speaks of its "unbearable" truth. Kirmayer (1996:173) calls it a "shattering book," stressing the "frailty and impersistence of memory," thereby introducing a discussion of "the relation of narrative to remembering and forgetting."

*Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald (2001), a German writer living in England, is an experience-distant novel, where we find a complex mystery concerning the true identity of the eponymous central character, an eccentric English scholar. Transmuted history becomes myth, demonstrating the saving grace of memory. However, when a "memoir" turns out to be fiction, as in the case of Kosinski's *Painted Bird* (1965) and Wilkomirski's *Fragments*(1996), explicitly subtitled *Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, the disappointed public cries "fraud."
Memories of the Holocaust are also represented in the graphic and plastic arts. Roman Opalka, born in France of Polish parents who were deported to Poland in 1940, has engaged in a lifetime art project of "endless numbers," a wordless memorial to the victims of the Holocaust (Koplos 2003:132). The video project by Israeli artist Omer Fast, entitled Spielberg's List, centers on his visits to the sites of Spielberg's filming of Shindler’s List (Ostrower 2003:126). In what may be seen an ironic twist on Holocaust memorialization, he discovered that tourists prefer visits to the set of the Spielberg's film to seeing the actual concentration camps since the copy is now in better condition than what is left of the camps. Is this evidence of a lack of imagination on the part of the tourists?

This flood of materials needs to be put into a larger context. One such context is the existence of technologies for recording memories: tape recorders and video cameras, television and web sites to share these materials. The growth of interest in "oral history" in the United States represents an environment in which such collections of materials has flourished. High school and college students have been encouraged to interview and record their elders. The Library of Congress seeks volunteers to interview 19 million surviving WW II veterans. It seems that we hold on to the past with considerable intensity. Kugelmass (1998:206) notes "death immersion" of North Americans following World War II, their psychic numbing, but also a "masculinist mythology that turned collective memory into a fairly tale." All of this has made it difficult for survivors to tell their story

Some Personal Memories.

My parents and I were fortunate to be able to leave Vienna not long after the
annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in March of 1938. The Germans immediately began to implement the anti-Jewish measures that they had gradually developed in Germany, over the previous five years. The local population added its own forms of harassment to these. Because a plebiscite had been planned before the invasion, sidewalks were covered with electioneering slogans. Jews were stopped on the streets and made to scrub them under the eyes of jeering crowds. At the same time, police had quotas of Jewish men to arrest randomly. Daily life suddenly became hazardous. Jewish children were expelled from secondary schools. Since I attended the one Jewish Gymnasium, I was not at risk in this respect, but numerous boys expelled from other schools joined our classes. My parents began to look for a way out.

At the age of fourteen, my classmates and I were keenly aware that our lives had been drastically altered, that we would be separated and that our futures were uncertain. Several fathers were arrested and sent to Dachau during those first months and some of the families tried to believe that the camp wasn't really so bad. To leave Austria, exit permits were required that involved extensive paper work, meeting numerous requirements, and endless waiting time. Entry visas to other countries were difficult to obtain. My paternal grandmother had a cousin in the United States who was willing to provide an Affidavit of Support for us. Such a document was an essential prerequisite for obtaining a U.S. immigration visa. It stated that the signer of the Affidavit guaranteed that the people for whom it was provided would not become charges of the Government. Also required were certifications of good character and good health. Specific diseases--tuberculosis, trachoma, mental illness--were cause for exclusion.

Above all, a low quota number was required. Quotas were based on country of
birth as that country was defined at the time of application. Although my parents were
born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and were citizens of Austria, their birthplaces were
then in Poland (prior to World War I, Poland as a separate state did not exist, having been
divided during the 18th century among Russia, Prussia, and Austria). The Polish quota
was oversubscribed and that meant an uncertain waiting period. Other relatives had to
face longer waiting periods. The husband of my father's sister, my aunt Bronka, was born
in what was then Romania, so that they could not hope for entry into the United States for
several years. At the beginning of 1939 they were able to go to Scotland as a "couple,"
that is as cook and butler, to work in a castle there owned by an English family. It is this
aunt's memoir of that experience that I later edited jointly with a colleague (Bourguignon
and Rigney eds.1998).

On the strength of an estimated three months waiting period, we were able to
obtain tourist visas for Switzerland. However, we did not receive our American visas
until September 1939, and by then the war had broken out. This long waiting period
involved the expiration of our visas, periodic threats of deportation to Germany and my
father's repeated trips to Bern to appeal for extensions, all of which exhausted our funds.

I spent most of this time in boarding school, an Orthodox Jewish institution
although my parents were secular and non-observant. They felt that, after our experiences
in Vienna, this would be a safe environment for me. The school was located in the Rhone
Valley, not far from Lausanne. I would learn French and would be away from the
depressing refugee environment my parents expected to find in Zurich. Some of the
students had come as refugees from Germany, others had not but became refugees in fact.
Among these I remember a girl from Italy. The Fascist government enacted its first anti-
Semitic laws during that year.

In Switzerland, whether at boarding school or in Zurich, we were refugees, as we were when we came to the United States in October of 1939, holding immigration visas. "Refugee" was then not an official category or status, as it was defined by the United Nations after the war and as it is now. When the U.S. went to war against Germany, those of us who had German passports became "enemy aliens." We were finger printed and prohibited from having short wave radios, even though we already had our "first papers," having declared our intention to become citizens. Young men, among these "enemy aliens," were drafted into the military and made citizens before being shipped overseas.

Arriving to the United States, I was still young enough to have to attend school, so that I finished high school and was able to go to college. Life as a refugee, with its displacements and change of language and culture, was, I believe, particularly difficult for my mother. While a teenager, she had come to Vienna as a refugee from eastern Galicia, where war was raging. She went on to study medicine, but in New York she found the task of taking examinations for licensure overwhelming. Meanwhile, my father struggled to make a living in business.

The United States Memorial Holocaust Museum defines survivors in the broadest terms, including those who were fortunate enough to get away early. Yet for me, one of those who got out before the major killing started, to be considered, and to consider myself, a "survivor" seems nothing short of indecent. For a long time, in this country, the focus was on the category of "victim"; today being a "survivor" is good, a "victim" bad. But what did I survive? Can early escape and the resulting avoidance of danger classify one as a survivor? Trahan (2002:176), who lived through the war in Vienna, writes:
The term "survivor" tends to be applied to people who passed through concentration camps or lived underground, whether in hiding, on the run, or with false papers; it is also sometimes accorded, more problematically, to those who emigrated before emigration became impossible.

And she speaks of the "queaziness" [in regard to this label] among members of this second group.

Terms such as "victim," "survivor," and, more recently "witness" represent essentializing, stereotyping categories. Being a "victim" is "bad," a "survivor" is "good." Survivor, in contrast to victim, seems to imply a heroic quality, as of one who struggled and opposed the victimizer, whereas the victim did not resist and therefore perished.

Currently, in the U.S., these terms are applied to victims and survivors in a variety of contexts, most notably to struggles in a different kind of war, the war on cancer. But as Rylko-Bauer and Waterston (n.d.) note:

The matter of "survivor" is not about who suffered more or who suffered less, or who can lay claim to the legacy of the Holocaust. Such debates about the relativity of suffering...are more likely to serve the erasure rather than the clarification of history.

Some of us who are writing and speaking of the Holocaust do so as Americans, in an American context--scholarly or otherwise--whether as survivors, however defined, or children of survivors or indeed children of those who did not survive. And this identity, in this context, is quite different from that of survivors or their children living in Israel, in Europe, or elsewhere. In Israel it has taken forty years to be able to talk about it. And the reasons for the silence there have been different ones than the reasons for the silence
Survivors had escaped while others had not, so that the unspoken question was: by what means did this happen? These issues are connected to the larger image of the Holocaust in Israel, to be discussed further in what follows.

It is obvious that the call to remember and the desire to forget are not unique to the events of the Holocaust. They are inherently connected to genocides and catastrophes, to wars and post-traumatic stress, to unique individual suffering, as well as to collective experiences. And if I am silent, does this mean I fail to offer witness? That I have forgotten?

Having left Vienna with my parents in the summer of 1938, I returned briefly only in 1992, after 54 years. Writing about that experience, I attempted to formulate a response to it, for myself (Bourguignon 1996). As I reread this account at this writing, it seems to me to involve many visual memories and associations. Much of this is quite fragmentary, bringing together varying parts of my childhood. It is impressionistic and not an organized series of reminiscences. And it definitely places Vienna, for me, into the past. Several years later I worked on a memoir by my aunt, Bronka Schneider, who also managed to escape Austria, recording her and her husband Joseph's life as servants in Scotland. Interested in women's writing, my colleague Barbara Rigney urged me to bring it to publication and offered to work with me. This joint effort informed her about both my aunt's experience as well as about my own past, in ways that I had never before felt the need to discuss with her.

Bronka's text, originally titled The Other Side of the Fence, was written in 1960, twenty years after the facts. Edited by Rigney and myself, it was published as Exile: A Memoir of 1939 by Bronka Schneider (1998). My attempt at contextualizing my aunt's
account--with reference to history, family, and culture--led to some questions and also to personal discoveries. Since I learned of the memoir only after my aunt's death I had no opportunity to ask her questions that might have illuminated some aspects of the story. Why, for example, does she insist that "life was good in Vienna before Hitler came" (p.42) when I think I know that as a result of the world wide Depression, life was in fact very hard for her and her husband? At the same time, anti-Semitism was endemic in Austria. Is it because, looking back from servitude in Scotland and persecution in Hitler's Austria, the past shone brightly for her? Undisturbed by questions, the author wrote her story as she wished to tell it.

The central character, as well as the writer, of the memoir is my aunt, my father's younger sister Bronka. Like my father and two other sisters she was born in Kraków, the ancient capital of Poland. Her husband Joseph was born in Bojan, Bukovina, then also part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, later part of Romania between the wars and now part of Ukraine. And this, as noted earlier, had serious consequences for their emigration from Austria.

Contextualizing meant that I needed to learn more about the history of Jews in Vienna and, more widely, in the Austro-Hungarian empire. This is a large subject, but in order not to overwhelm my aunt's text, I had to restrict myself to essentials and did not include the following. It is relevant here because it shows the complexity of Jewish history and identity and relates significantly to the subject of mythic history that I wish to explore in this essay.3

Once, when the yearly mule train to Russia stopped in Bojan, a young man in its crew fell ill. Joseph's family agreed to keep him until the mule train's return. The family's
young daughter and the young man fell in love and wanted to get married. When the
mule train returned, the driver explained that the young man, though raised by him, was
not his son but of unknown origin. When he was a small child there had been an epidemic
in the region and the rabbis decided that God's wrath could be appeased only by a
sacrifice (korban). The first-born boy children were to be exposed. In practice, this meant
that they were taken to marketplaces in neighboring towns and adopted by Jewish
families. The young man, Eliezer, was Joseph's grandfather.

This story sheds light on the relationship between belief and behavior. Only a
hundred years before the time I heard it in about 1948, some Jews lived in worlds so
culturally remote that only on a cosmic level could they cope with a health crisis while at
the same time other Jews nearby, such as the urbanites of Czernowitz, were part of the
modern world of the 19th century. That the young Eliezer, an oldest son and "sacrificed"
child of unknown parents, became a wise grandfather to my uncle, his daughter's child,
and a respected elder in the community, gives this story mythic proportions. It has
implications for our understanding of the present as well: such a view of the world is still
alive among ultra-orthodox Jews (heredim) for whom the Shoah was God's punishment
for the sins of the Jews.

After the book's publication, I was impressed to discover how many people, Jews
and non-Jews alike, had had some contact with individuals who had survived and escaped
or who had family stories of people who did not survive. Gelya Frank (2000), in her
lengthy review of the book in the American Anthropologist, saw it as an instance of the
anthropology of memory and wondered how I had come to anthropology. In college,
when I first discovered anthropology, it seemed an obvious choice for me: I was learning
a new language and a new way of life. The concepts of culture and of cultural relativity offered a valuable perspective on these differences and a mode of coping with them.

The problems of communicating what happened to people in another time and place are great, resulting in distortions that range from the horrendous to the trivial. The horrendous is perhaps best exemplified by Holocaust deniers. By contrast, the following is a trivial yet telling example.

My aunt, whose English was better than her husband's, tells how, one day, her husband came into the kitchen somewhat agitated, wondering why their employer had asked him to "give the gardener a hand." After all, he had already shaken hands with him earlier that morning. My aunt figured out that in English, unlike German, the phrase did not mean "to shake hands" but rather "to help." In Laqueur's book, *Generation Exodus* (2001:202), this is how this incident is rendered:

The experience of the Schneiders, a husband and wife from Vienna, who went to a remote castle in Scotland, with twenty-two rooms and twelve bathrooms was not atypical...[W]hen she [the mistress] asked Mr. Schneider to give a hand to the gardener, the man went into a state of panic because, much as he wanted to please his employer, he was not willing to accept amputation (sic).

How is this absurd reading to be explained? As the result of a non-German speaking assistant's ignorance? As intentional dramatization? Even the details are altered: only a few of the rooms and bathrooms were in use, and the story did not lead to the Schneiders' departure from the castle. Given the oddity of this example, one may wonder how much confidence ought to be placed in the rest of the material in this volume.

Here is another small example. In a creative writing class in college in New York, in
1942 or 1943, I wrote a story placed in the Vienna of March 1938. My protagonist was a Jewish man, who killed himself as the German troops marched in. In the days and weeks after the German takeover, there was indeed a wave of Jewish suicides, one that was presented in the Nazi-controlled press as evidence of the moral weakness of Jews. It was, of course, rather evidence that many people felt trapped, with no hope of a way out. However, I failed to make my fellow students understand this. Was it that the point was not made clearly, the story not well written? Probably, but the students' skepticism mirrors the repeated questions of adults: if it was so bad for the Jews in Germany, why didn't they just leave?

The suppression and return of memories.

While there is a major effort under way to save the record of the past, there has long been a strong push toward forgetting, even suppressing, knowledge of the Holocaust. The subject was virtually taboo for a number of years. Climo (1995:184), under the heading "Prisoners of Silence: A Vicarious Holocaust Memory," writes that, when he learned for the first time of a public Holocaust memorial ritual, "I was overcome with powerful feelings of emotional pain...as if some secret of my own past had been revealed by a stranger, without my knowledge or consent...I didn't have a clue about their source." Himself neither a survivor nor the child of survivors, he had in childhood developed a vicarious identity and memory regarding the Holocaust, in his association with adult survivors. Examining these experiences with great sensitivity, he notes that Holocaust survivors in the immediate postwar period spoke little about the horrific events, "and certainly not to children. Some say it was a desire to protect the children. But it was also the inability of most people to put their humiliation into words." People
wanted "to repress the memories and get on with their lives." Yet they passed their experiences on in a myriad of indirect ways, so that the young Jacob came to identify with the survivors, to make their memory his own.\footnote{In my own family, there was silence as well; more accurately, I think, two kinds of silence: the silence of knowing and the silence of not knowing. My parents each had a married sister living in Poland. At the outbreak of the war in September 1939, contact with them was severed. Sometime during the war, perhaps in 1942, my mother saw a small item in the \textit{New York Times}, about mobile vans used by Germans in Poland to gas Jews. Not until 1948 did she learn what had happened, when she met a Jewish physician from the region where her sister had lived. It seemed that when the Germans invaded the area, a number of Jews in that small community decided to commit suicide and asked the pharmacist for cyanide. The pharmacist, however, gave them a harmless powder---except for my aunt and uncle. Because he was a physician, they received the real poison. It seemed that this case came to be widely known among Jews in the region. My mother accepted the veracity of this story; she was clearly horrified, but little was said about it, at least in my presence. Silence did not mean forgetting.}

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The story of my father's sister and her family is also grim. My parents learned what had happened to them only some time after the war when they received a letter from my uncle, from a displaced persons camp in Germany. My aunt, her husband and teenage daughter had lived in Lwow (now Lviv, in Ukraine). At some point during the German occupation they decided that it would be safer to separate. The husband survived, my aunt and cousin did not. Since I was away in graduate school when the letter came, I did not get my parents' first reaction to it. It was written in Polish, a
language I could not read. My memory is that my parents thought the details of the story too awful to share with me. There is a twist to this story. In 1933, when my cousin was eleven years old, she developed a potentially fatal brain tumor. Her terrified father brought her to Vienna, where the only brain surgeon, American-trained, operated on her successfully. She grew to be a healthy, handsome teenager. In the winter of 1938-39, my uncle visited my parents in Zurich, while he was on a business trip, as an attorney for the Polish national petroleum company. My father urged him to send my cousin to school in England or America, given the evident risk of war. My uncle would not and could not consider a separation from his beloved child. He survived to end his days in Australia.

**The transformation of memory into myth and mythic history**

Memories are not only individual and collective, they also become transformed over time, as Bronka’s memoir demonstrates, and can even take on mythic proportions. As anthropologists we are led to ask how other people (for example, Andean Indians, Haitians) have dealt with their experiences of suffering and persecution. One response was violence, revolution, as in Haiti. However, people cope with oppression not only physically and politically, but also cognitively and intellectually. Marion and Heyden (1990:220) in reviewing Graulich's (1987) study of Mexican myths, write:

"Mesoamerican cosmovision is a kind of mnemotechics used to explain and translate history--to make it coherent." They talk of *mythic history*, which is not only myth turned into a sacred tale but, more importantly, a coherent one. From historic events and bits of earlier stories an account was developed, satisfying people's need for order and coherence, thus denying the disorder of actual history.

*Mythic history and manipulated history: an Andean example.*
Visiting Machu Picchu with a Colombian medicine man, Michael Taussig (1992:46) was impressed by the sight, but the Indian was not. He had seen it all before, he said, when he had taken the hallucinogen *yagé* while healing. But how did they move these enormous stones, Taussig asked. The Spanish did it, the old man explained, with whips, forcing the Indians to carry the stones. "That," he said, "is exactly what the Spanish did to my father-in-law." The Spanish here are Capuchin Fathers, missionaries in his community. The "old man," says Taussig, "has collapsed three centuries...into a flashing instant of time..." Being an Indian still means being oppressed by the Spanish. The past is brought into the present and made politically and morally relevant, functioning as a form of resistance.

This example of mythic history may be contrasted with the manipulated history of Cuzco (QOSQO) currently being presented both to the local people and to tourists (Silverman 2002). Its name now spelled Qosqo, the city is subject to historic reconstructions and presentations, stimulating local pride in Indianness. The slogan of this campaign is: "discover the old QOSQO to construct the new Qosqo." A salient feature of the past, however, is elided: The Inca, like the Spaniards after them, were conquerors. The local people were not Inca. The Inca's own origin myth was told by Garcilaso de la Vega in his *Royal Commentaries* (1961[1609]). The son of a Spanish nobleman and an Inca princess, Garcilaso told the story as he had heard it from the men of his mother's family. According to this account, Manco Capac, the first Inca and his sister-wife were the children of the Sun and the Moon. They gathered local people--Garcilaso refers to them as "savages"--to teach them various arts and practices. On the basis of this subject population they built their state and empire.
The ancient Mesoamericans were not alone in seeking order and predictability, even if they had to impose it on a disorderly world of human affairs. In our attempt to understand our experience, we tell ourselves and each other stories that fit our cognitive structures, even at the risk of modifying these structures when necessary. I refer here to our broad world view, our cosmological understanding, in A. I. Hallowell's (1955) terms, our culturally constituted behavioral environment. We ask: What beings and forces are at work? What was the past like? What can we predict of the future? Stories we tell each other--and ourselves--help us cope with our experiences, give them meaning. The remarks of Taussig's Indian companion exemplify this in a direct and unassuming way. *Haitian cosmology and ritual as mythic history.*

In Haiti mythic history is told mostly through ritual practice and the explanations associated with it. Relations with the *lwa*, the spirit of *vodou*, are direct and intimate. The spirits communicate with those who serve them though possession, through dreams, and in other ways. Men of power (Dessalines, even Papa Doc) have become *lwa*, as did Shango and Ogun among the Yoruba. The image of the possessed as the horse of the *lwa* reflects the fear and awe, an image of power and domination, inspired by invading cavalry among West Africans (Matory 1993) (as perhaps the image of the centaur did among the Greeks). Legba, the sexy African trickster who danced with a wooden phallus, has been transformed into a lame old man with a crutch. African ethnic groups have become "*nachon*"--nations of spirits. *Vodou*, integrating elements of belief and practice of several African groups as well as European elements, includes residues of Haitian history. Of the colonial period, the slave is reflected in the *zombi*; race classification and their social consequences have remained -- they are projected on to the spirits. As one
woman told me when discussing a dream, for in dreams the lwa take human form: “if you dream of a beautiful reddish woman, you know it is Ezili. Any good looking man, with beautiful hair, any mulatto, that is Danbala” (Bourguignon 2003: 142). The skin and hair color characteristics of these lwa mark them as beings of high rank. Note that not only has this cosmology accepted the racial division of the society, individuals who have accepted it have internalized it.

Haitian cosmology is flexible and evolving, adding new elements over time. Like other poor people, Haitians are hungry, often quite literally and so are their lwa. They demand sacrifices and it is said that some among them can be made to work at the bidding of those who feed them, by the manner in which they are fed. When they kill people--through illness--they are said to "eat" them. We now hear of a "politique du ventre"--a politics of the belly, whereby different political factions seek maximal rewards. As Fatton (2002:13) puts it with reference to various groups: "the different factions of the Lavalas bloc have been literally eating each other to digest the limited fruits of power." Major profiteers are spoken of as "grands mangeurs"--big eaters. As Kakar (1982:99) remarks with reference to the Oraon, "a people who have known hunger will breed hungry spirits and must constantly struggle to fight with the persecuting demon of greed."

And then there is the following I was told in Haiti by a young woman more than fifty years ago. To illustrate her point that you never know who anyone is, this is what she said:

Like beggars you don't know. Once a beggar had gone to ask for a glass of water and one woman chased him away and the second gave him a dirty pot. But the
third gave him a clean tray with a clean glass. The beggar was really bondye (the Good Lord). So he told the woman there would be a great disaster and she should go away and not even turn around. And then there was a great disaster. You have heard about it, haven't you? That was in Dominicanie. But the woman turned around and so she turned into a rock.

The raw materials of this story are easily recognized: Christian injunctions to do unto the least, a (then) recent historical event—the 1936 Hurricane that destroyed the capital of the Dominican Republic, the story of Lot's wife. A moral injunction and the ambiguity and suspicion of strangers are seamlessly combined. As much of mythic history, it is a story with a message. As with Taussig's story, the past is made present and morally and perhaps politically relevant.

Myth and more recent history

Here is a story that is a bit closer to home. In 1938, in my Swiss boarding school, a fellow student, a girl from Hungary reported the following events: A couple she knew had stopped in the city of Wiener-Neustadt on a car trip to Vienna. There they had consulted a fortune teller, who said that if there was a corpse in the car on their arrival in Vienna, Hitler would die by a certain date. On the road, they came across a traffic accident and took a seriously hurt man along. He died before they arrived in the city. My friend then wondered whether this prediction would in fact come true.

Several years later, working in the New York Public Library, I ran across a study by the psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte (1947), entitled "the myth of the corpse in the car." Having escaped from France and living in London during the war she had begun to hear variants of my friend's story, and began to collect them. Although some were
dramatic and bloody, the point was always the same, the prediction of a corpse in a car linked to a desirable outcome: the end of the war now, rather than Hitler's death. Bonaparte interpreted the corpse as a human sacrifice to produce a favorable outcome. What I had heard as an anecdote turned out to be part of the construction of a shared myth, expressive of hope.

Mythic history and forms of messianism.

Messianism is a particular type of mythic history that combines a version of the past with expectations for a better future. Messianic movements have social, political and military consequences. Amatzia Baram explained in an interview with the *New York Times* (Charney 2004):

In Shia tradition, the Mahdi is the 12th and last ancient imam, who disappeared and is expected to reappear some day. Moktada al-Sadre claims that the Americans knew the appearance was imminent and therefore invaded Iraq: to grab the Mahdi and kill him... [H]is supporters [imply] that he is "the son of the Mahdi," and he named his militia the Mahdi army.

In the past, there have been other insurgencies linked to this belief. In the 1880’s, a mahdi arose in Nubia, who took Khartoum and became master of the Sudan. His successor was eventually defeated by the British in 1898.

Of particular interest is the idea that a leader of the past did not die but disappeared to return to save his people. The German Emperor Frederick I. Hohenstauffen, called Babarossa, drowned in Asia Minor while leading the Third Crusade. According to German legend he sits in a cavern in the Kyffhäuser Mountains in Thuringia, waiting to return when needed by his country. Hitler called his campaign
against the Soviet Union "Operation Barbarossa."

Messianic movements also grew up in 19th century northern and northeastern Brazil. These drew on Portuguese legends that prophesied the return of King Sebastian, who was lost in his war against the Moors and one of these movements has received extensive fictional treatment (da Cunha 1911/1944, Vargas Llosa 1981/1984).

When Jews experienced a major period of persecution, expulsion and death, they reacted by creating a complex mystical system. According to Gershom, Jewish mysticism, in the form of the Lurianic Kabbalah, appeared as a response to the catastrophe of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and their encounter with the Spanish Inquisition. As Cynthia Ozick (2002:148) summarized Scholem's understanding: "For centuries, through persecutions and expulsions, forced conversions and torchings, to the abyss of the Catastrophe, Jews had suffered terror. Responding to these recurrent crises, the mystical imagination had devised a cosmogony that incorporated Jewish historical experience." It should be noted that this cosmogony included a role for the Jews in the salvation of the universe. There is also a more immediate promise in this mystical view. In Sholem's words: "A people which had suffered from all the tribulations which exile and persecution could bring and which...lived between the poles of exile and redemption needed little to take the final step to Messianism" (Sholem 1961:287-288). The reference here is to the disastrous messianic movement of Sabbatai Zevi (1625-1676).

The recurrence of apocalyptic hopes

Mythic history not only accounts for the past, but also has implications for the present and the future, as my final example concerning the Book of Revelations demonstrates. The author of this highly symbolic and coded book draws on the past to
predict the future, to give his readers and hearers confidence, to castigate the wicked. For his authority he peppers his text with multiple biblical references that he expects his audience to recognize. He speaks of a final battle in a place of well known earlier battles: Armageddon, *har magedon*, the historic and archaeological site of Megiddo in northern Israel. The final battle will pit the major powers of the earth against each other and will end in their destruction. But before this, there will be the Second Coming of Christ, the New Jerusalem, and a reign of peace of a thousand years.\(^5\)

In the 21st century, this apocalyptic vision provides the ground for American evangelical Christians in their support of the current government of the State of Israel. If Jerry Fallwell is to be believed, \(^6\) this is not a small marginal group but 70 million American strong.\(^7\)

**Mythic History and the Holocaust: Conclusions.**

Is there mythic history based on the events of the Holocaust? This would surely require a more complex study and perhaps it is too soon to attempt such a task. However, there are elements of mythic history to be seen, and perhaps we can discern their political referents. The elements that come to mind do not form a coherent, consistent picture. There are many voices, informed by different perspectives, but all are expressions of the need to make sense of the events. The following are a few examples:

The Holocaust deniers stand against the collective memory. However, efforts to refute them have served to put the evidence publicly and legally, on record, as shown by the work of Deborah Lipstad (1993).

The "official" Israeli version of the Holocaust, which, as Zertal (1998) and others have pointed out, has changed over time, has served the political ends of the state. Gur-
Ze'ev (2003:52, also 1998) writes:

The 1953 Knesset made control of the Holocaust memory a matter of law, and a special government agency was created, Mosad Yad Vashem, to protect, represent, and police the official memory of the dead as part of the Zionist narrative to (sic) which galut (life in Diaspora) inexorably leads to geula (redemption), and shoah (Holocaust) to tekuma (resurrection) (italics in original).

He goes on to note that "an instrumentalist attitude toward historical knowledge does service in the present constitution of collective identity."

The two most important and best known witnesses and commentators on the Holocaust, Primo Levi and Eli Wiesel, unceasingly spoke of the events, their own experiences, and the larger picture. They wished the world to know and to remember, but they differed in how they saw that larger picture. For Wiesel, it has been a search for understanding a divine plan. Levi, by contrast, rejected the term "Holocaust" with its sacrificial, sanctifying meaning. In Thomas Lacqueur's (2002:9) words: "Heroically secular he had nothing but contempt for anyone...who thinks that God had anything to do with Auschwitz." It is therefore ironic that there has been much speculation that Levi may have committed suicide, in spite of strong evidence to the contrary (Gambetta 2002).

Does the idea appeal to some, since it suggests that carrying the burden of being a witness is too much to bear? Other heroic survivors, such as Jean Améry and Paul Celan had committed suicide. Do we see mythmaking at work here?

A major icon of the Holocaust is Anne Frank. As Ian Buruma (1998) has shown, her story has had an "after-life," having now been told in multiple versions. In 2004, the U.S. Memorial Holocaust Museum presented an exhibit entitled Anne Frank the Writer:
An Unfinished Story, in collaboration with the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, Amsterdam and the ANNE FRANK-Fonds, Basel, with the assistance of the Anne Frank House, Amsterdam. How her story is told and read depends to a considerable extent on who the tellers and readers are and when and where they are situated. There is a difference between the first text and later versions, between the film and the texts, or the play, between adult and juvenile versions of her account. Even her name has been changed from Anna to Anne. In middle and high school units on the Holocaust, she is frequently a key figure. In Phillip Roth's novel The Ghostwriter (1979) a young man imagines a girl in his mentor's home to be Anne Frank, who had mysteriously survived. She has acquired mythic status.

For personal and collective reasons, it is important not to suppress the past but rather to acknowledge, to understand, and to cope with it. In our struggle to make sense of our experiences we tell each other, and ourselves, accounts of the events--accounts that fit our cosmological understandings. Not only do such accounts give events meaning, they also help us gain a distance to the events and the possibility of constructing new lives. The past has consequences. The victims may be gone and soon will the last of the survivors. The next generation now questions and seeks to explore what has been silenced, if not forgotten. Silence is looking away, unwillingness to confront reality. Ignoring, denying the past, we risk madness, yet the calls to action of mythic history may have grave consequences, for survivors and for those who see themselves as their heirs.

Notes
This is an expanded version of a paper presented at the 2002 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, as part of a panel, "Bringing the Past into the Present: Family Narratives of Holocaust and Exile," organized by Barbara Rylko-Bauer. I wish to thank Barbara for her inspiration as well as her helpful comments and editorial help.

"The Museum defines a survivor as a person who was displaced, persecuted and/or discriminated against by the racial, religious, ethnic and political policies of the Nazis and their allies. In addition to former inmates of concentration camps and ghettos, this includes among others, refugees and people in hiding."

See http://www.ushmm.org

The story is included in a privately printed family history edited by my uncle's cousin Ludwig Rudel (1995).

For comparison with other persecutions and their effects, see Judith Atkinson's book, Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines (2003), which is about native Australians.

Note that the Nazis, too, spoke of a Thousand Year Reich!

CBS 60 Minutes, October 6, 2002: Speaking of the coming Apocalypse, as the basis of the support by American evangelical Christians for the current government of Israel, Jerry Fallwell said: "Ariel Sharon can count on George Bush to do the right thing." Kay Arthur, another leader of the movement spoke of "prophecy unfolding," and emphasized that Jews must convert or be destroyed.

A major means of diffusion of these views is a series of novels about the end of days by Tim La Haye. For a review, see Joan Didion(2003). La Haye's 2004 novel is entitled Glorious Appearance.

A recent study of Jewish seniors suffering from depression who were Holocaust survivors found that they were 87% more likely to be thinking about suicide than those who had not lived through the Holocaust, in part because the psychological scars of this experience remain throughout their lifetime (Clare et al. 2004).