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Commandant of Lubizec: Fiction and the Holocaust in the Twilight of the Survivor Era

By Stephen J. Gaies

The Commandant of Lubizec: Fiction and the Holocaust in the Twilight of the Survivor Era
By Stephen J. Gaies (UNI Center for Holocaust and Genocide Education)

1. Seventy years after the liberation of the camps, Holocaust scholarship remains as vibrant and self-renewing as ever. Important works have been published in recent years; many have helped to shift the spotlight onto topics to which too little attention had been paid. For example, researchers like Omer Bartov, Timothy Snyder and Robert DesBois have focused on the war in the East and mass murder in the western Soviet Union, where some one and a half million Jews were shot by firing squads in what is now often referred to, following DesBois and the title of his book, as the *Holocaust by bullets*. Wendy Lower's *Hitler's Furies* has re-opened the topic of the significant roles of women in the killing fields of the East. The access that scholars now have to archives that were previously unavailable is only one of many factors that suggest that Holocaust scholarship will continue to provide ever-new perspectives on what is already the most written about event in history.

2. Also flourishing is writing by descendants of Holocaust survivors. Second-generation, or 2G, writing by children of survivors has been a subgenre of Holocaust literature for almost four decades, and today 3G writing by the grandchildren of survivors—one of the most accomplished examples of which is Sarah Wildman's *Paper Love*—is developing a separate and distinct identity (see, for example, Dreifus, Fogelman).[\[1\]](#)

3. Holocaust scholarship depends less today than ever on the testimony of living survivors, and much if not most 3G writing has been produced long after the passing of the grandparent(s)-survivor(s). This represents a crossroads for Holocaust education for the general public and in our schools. The youngest survivors of the Holocaust who were old enough to have reliable and substantive memory of that time are now in their 80's. A large percentage of survivors are considerably older, and many are no longer capable of sharing their stories. Survivors themselves as well as museums and other institutions dedicated to preserving the memory of the Holocaust have for several years been pondering the question of what is to be done when

the seemingly irreplaceable experience of meeting and hearing Holocaust survivors is no longer possible. Recently the Shoah Foundation Institute of Visual History at the University of Southern California began piloting an expensive project called New Dimensions in Technology (NDT), which has created holographic images of a Holocaust survivor who can converse with viewers and answer questions about his experiences (Lokting). Reaction to a virtual encounter with a survivor has been mixed, and only adds urgency to questions about the impact of other vehicles—memoirs, films and the USC Shoah Foundation’s enormous video archive itself—for representing and teaching about the Holocaust in the post-survivor era.

The Commandant of Lubizec and Operation Reinhard

4. For a variety of reasons—perhaps most notably the geopolitics of the postwar era—certain aspects of the Holocaust are much better known than others. Patrick Hicks’ 2014 novel *The Commandant of Lubizec*, the focus of this essay, is an effort to focus attention on a relatively unknown but extremely significant phase of the Holocaust. Specifically, the Operation Reinhard camps depicted through the fictional composite of Lubizec in the novel represent an important and very lethal stage in the evolution of mass murder by the Nazis—not only of the Jews of Europe, but of other “racial inferiors” (Soviet POWs, Roma, Poles, and the disabled).

5. Operation Reinhard was the code name for the plan to murder the roughly two million Jews residing in the *Generalgouvernement*, the part of German-occupied Poland that had not been annexed to Germany, to German East Prussia or to areas of the Soviet Union occupied by Germany. “Reinhard” refers to Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Reich Security Main Office. Heydrich had been put in charge of the task of dealing with the “Jewish question,” and the Operation Reinhard camps would become a key part of what would be known from January 1942 on as the *Endlösung*, or “Final Solution.”[\[2\]](#)

6. The inspiration for the novel was Hicks’ discovery that although most of his students had heard of and knew something about Auschwitz, very few had heard the name “Treblinka,” and almost none had heard of Bełżec and Sobibór, the other two historical Operation Reinhard camps.[\[3\]](#) This struck Hicks as a serious gap in his students’ knowledge: these camps “aren’t lodged in the public imagination as fully as they should be” (5). The significance of the gap becomes evident when we realize that the death toll at these three camps is estimated between 1.5 and 1.7 million—roughly a quarter or more of all the European Jewish victims of the Holocaust.[\[4\]](#)

7. *The Commandant of Lubizec* is an effort to fill that gap—not for historians, but for readers with an interest in the Nazi era and the Holocaust. The novel tells the story of Lubizec, a fictional death camp that is a composite of three historical Operation Reinhard camps constructed in 1942 to implement a new phase of the Nazi genocide. The novel begins in May 1942 with the arrival in Lubizec of a new commandant, Hans-Peter Guth, who turns a run-down, undisciplined concentration camp into an ever more efficient killing center, and ends with the shutting down of Lubizec in March 1943 following a prisoner revolt (based on historical revolts in Treblinka in August 1943 and in Sobibór two months later). The last three chapters of the novel describe the immediate aftermath of the revolt as well as the eventual fate of the main characters and the camp itself.

8. The word “Auschwitz” is now so iconic of the Holocaust that many people assume that this camp, the center of the mass murder operations in the latter part of the Holocaust, sprang full-blown out of the mind of the architects of the Nazi genocide. But Auschwitz-Birkenau itself changed greatly during its four and a half year existence. So too did the program of mass

murder that Nazi Germany unleashed on so-called “racial inferiors” and its other enemies. *The Commandant of Lubizec* makes several references to the stages that preceded and followed Operation Reinhard, and the several narratives of the novel capture the effort made at each stage (never completely successfully) to shroud mass murder in secrecy.

9. The first phase of mass murder was directed primarily at German citizens: primarily persons with mental or physical disabilities, deemed “useless eaters” and “life unworthy of life,” and a threat to so-called Aryan purity and the perfection of the Aryan “race.” Killing centers set up around Germany (and in one case in Austria) and operating as part of the *Aktion T-4*, or euthanasia program, engaged in so-called “mercy killings” by lethal injection and other means. As a result of protests by family members and prominent church officials (most notably the Bishop of Munster^[5]), the program was officially shut down in August 1941, although killings would continue on a smaller, less organized scale. The total number of victims of the T-4 program is typically estimated at 70,000.

10. The second phase of mass murder, the “Holocaust by bullets” mentioned in the opening paragraph of this essay, was carried out in the wake of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Special units of the SS (*Einsatzgruppen*) followed the *Wehrmacht* (German Army) into the western part of the Soviet Union and carried out mass shootings of Jews, who would typically be rounded up and taken to a forest or some other area outside their town, then buried in a pit that in some cases they had been forced to dig. This method proved inefficient, but even more it was found to be psychologically draining for the SS and other killers who were charged with this task. Although mass shootings would continue to take place in eastern Poland well into 1942,^[6] experiments with mobile gas vans—the third stage of mass murder—had been taking place since 1940.^[7] This method would also prove to be inefficient: The vans had difficulty navigating unpaved or poorly paved roads and would frequently break down. Nor could they kill on the scale and with the speed required. In addition, they were easily identified by the local civilian population as “death trucks.” (Browning, *Fateful Months* 64)

11. The next stage was the creation of the Operation Reinhard camps, with stationary gas chambers, using carbon monoxide and powered by diesel engines, along with crematoria or other means for disposing of the bodies.^[8] Operation Reinhard brought into existence a new kind of camp for the mass murder of the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe: the *Vernichtungslager* (literally, “extermination camp”), typically translated into English as “death camp.” Unlike concentration camps and work camps, the Operation Reinhard camps were built for the sole purpose of killing (and, along with that, dispossessing victims of all the valuables and other items they had brought with them under the illusion that they were being sent to a work camp). All but the tiniest percentage of each trainload that arrived at a death camp were dead within an hour. Guth’s constant efforts to increase the efficiency and productivity of Lubizec is a reflection of the Nazi enterprise to industrialize mass murder. We also learn that like many of the historical death camp commandants and high-ranking SS officers at these camps, Guth had previously been involved in the T-4 program.

12. The death camps had another crucial advantage over the other methods of mass murder. They could be located in remote areas and insulated from civilians, who were often forcibly displaced from nearby farms and villages. This was done at Lubizec, whose perimeter was heavily mined, and indeed this careful isolation of the camp from curious eyes brings Guth’s marital problems to a head when he discovers that his wife Jasmine had tried to approach the camp secretly by hiking through the surrounding forest and then physically blocks the approach road with his car when she subsequently tries to drive up to the camp entrance.

Jasmine's suspicions about the camp being something different from what her husband says it is—a transit camp—are fueled by rumors she hears from her Polish maid and others in the neighborhood as well as by her husband's instructions to drink only bottled water, but even more by the terrible stench that emanates from the camp—making it impossible to hide completely that something terrible is happening in the camp, even if no one can fully comprehend the scale of the crimes being committed.

13. The three death camps built for Operation Reinhard—Treblinka (more precisely, Treblinka II), Bełżec and Sobibór—all began mass-killing operations in 1942: Bełżec in March, Sobibór in May and Treblinka in July. Bełżec stopped operating in December 1942, Treblinka in August 1943 and Sobibór in October 1943—in the latter two cases, as a result of the prisoner revolts. In January 1944, SS General Odilo Globocnik, the director of Operation Reinhard, submitted his final report to *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler.

14. The Operation Reinhard camps left few survivors. There were at most about 130 prisoners in the three Operation Reinhard camps who were alive at the end of the war: some 60 or 70 from Treblinka, 50 or so from Sobibór and 7 from Bełżec. This tiny remnant of the more than a million and a half Jews (along with relatively small numbers of Roma, Poles and Soviet POWs) who were transported to these camps is largely the result of prisoner revolts and escapes from Treblinka and Sobibór.

15. One might therefore not expect to find many eyewitness accounts of these camps. And indeed, only one reputable survivor account exists of Bełżec: Rudolf Reder's *Bełżec*. Nevertheless, there is a considerable body of first-hand testimony about Treblinka and Sobibór. The most complete overview of the Operation Reinhard camps is Yitzhak Arad's *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Camps* (1987). Arad (whose own parents died in Treblinka) uses a broad range of primary sources: testimonies of survivors to be sure, but also “German documents, Underground sources, testimonies by Poles and Germans, and German Trial protocols” (viii). Bryant's analysis of the trials conducted in the 1950s and 1960s of Operation Reinhard war criminals focuses in part on the handling by the West German courts of eyewitness testimony by surviving prisoners.[\[9\]](#)

16. Alexander Donat, who avoided deportation to Treblinka and survived the Warsaw Ghetto with his family, collected several long eyewitness accounts from survivors in his book, *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary*. Many of these accounts were produced in conjunction with a Jewish Historical Commission in Warsaw project begun after the liberation of Poland to record the testimonies of survivors of Treblinka. Several other survivor accounts appeared around this time in periodicals and other publications—some in Polish, some in Russian, some in Yiddish—in Poland and the Soviet Union, including Jankiel Wiernik's *A Year in Treblinka: An Inmate Who Escaped Tells the Day-to-Day Facts of One Year of His Torturous Experiences*, which was distributed as a clandestine booklet in Poland in 1944 (and published in Palestine in the same year) and then translated into English a year later by the American Representation of the General Jewish Workers' Union of Poland.

17. Two decades later, Jean-François Steiner's highly controversial novel *Treblinka* (1966) of the August 1943 prisoner revolt was published. Steiner claimed that the novel was based on survivor testimony (although many of the survivors repudiated the work and claimed that their testimony had been misused). Steiner himself has complicated family connections: His biological father was deported and died in a sub-camp of Auschwitz, and Steiner spent a year and a half living in a kibbutz in Israel in the 1950s; nevertheless, in 1967 he married Grit von Brauchitsch, the granddaughter of Marshal Walter von Brauchitsch, commander-in-chief of

German ground forces from 1938 to 1942, and the daughter of Bernd von Brauchitsch, senior aide de camp of Hermann Goering. The novel, criticized by some of France's foremost writers and intellectuals, was considered antisemitic by many, a charge which gained more support, if indeed it needed any, by Steiner's defense of Maurice Papon, a French civil servant tried in 1997 for his role in the deportation of several hundred Jews from Bordeaux. The controversy surrounding Steiner's work came to be called the Treblinka Affair, and the book, published shortly after the verdicts in the First Treblinka Trial in Düsseldorf in late 1965, provoked a great deal of debate about Holocaust memory in a country that had barely begun to examine the complex and painful role of French complicity and collaboration in the crimes of Nazi Germany (Moyn).

18. Beginning in the late 1980s, several memoirs by survivors of Treblinka were published: Eddie Weinstein's *17 Days in Treblinka: Daring to Resist, and Refusing to Die* (1988); Samuel Willenberg's *Surviving Treblinka* (1989); Richard Glazar's *Trap with a Green Fence: Survival in Treblinka* (1995); a memoir by two survivors, Israel Cymlich and Oscar Strawczynski, *Escaping Hell In Treblinka* (2007); Chil Rajchman's *The Last Jew of Treblinka* (2009); and most recently Mark Smith's *Treblinka Survivor: The Life and Death of Hershl Sperling* (based on Sperling's own account and written with the approval of Sperling's son Sam) (2010).

19. Richard Rashke's *Escape from Sobibor* (1982) contains summaries of a larger number of interviews and other interactions with survivors, and several memoirs have been published within the last twenty years: Thomas (Toivi) Blatt's *From the Ashes of Sobibor: A Story of Survival* (1997) and *Sobibor: The Forgotten Revolt - A Survivor's Report* (1997); Philip "Fiszel" Bialowitz's *A Promise at Sobibor: A Jewish Boy's Story of Revolt and Survival in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (2010); and Dov Freiberg's *To Survive Sobibor* (2007). Fiction about Sobibór includes Michael Lev's *Sobibor* (2007) and Jean Molla's *Sobibor* (2006), the latter illustrating fiction that is loosely anchored at best in the actual history of the camp. Films about the revolt in Sobibór include *Escape from Sobibor* (1987), based on the Rashke book; some of the inauthenticity of the film reflects industry standards of the time that would not allow a more realistic depiction of the state of the prisoners and the brutality of the camp. Two documentaries about the revolt are Claude Lanzmann's *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.* (2001); and *Escape from a Nazi Death Camp* (2014), released right around the time that *The Commandant of Lubizec* was published. This latter film was made to coincide with the 70th anniversary (and presumably last) reunion of survivors of the escape: Philip Bialowitz, Thomas (Toivi) Blatt, Selma Engel and Semyon Rosenfeld.

20. Several of these and other works are explicitly acknowledged by Hicks as sources, and others also provided material for and shaped his thinking about how to construct a fictional narrative of the Operation Reinhard camps.

Fiction and the Holocaust

21. Hicks' interest in the Holocaust began when he was young, as described in a 2014 interview:

I was nine or ten and there was a documentary on PBS. This was back in the 1970s. My parents sat on a sofa behind me and, on TV, I saw all these bodies being rolled into a ditch. I was just stunned that this had ever happened. It shocked me, and I felt compelled to learn more. As writers, we like to think we choose the stories we tell, but I'm not convinced it works that way. I think stories sometimes choose us. I feel that way about the Holocaust. (Wingate Par. 11)

Although most of his published books have been of poetry, Hicks says of himself, “I’ve always considered myself a fiction writer who happens to be somewhat competent at poetry” (Wingate Par. 17). So it was natural that he would choose fiction for the subject that in a sense had always been with him. If that subject had been the American Civil War or World War I, or almost any other historical event, a fictional treatment would hardly have attracted any attention, and it would certainly not have weighed on the author’s mind as it did in the writing of *The Commandant of Lubizec*. But the project that Patrick Hicks has undertaken must be understood in the context of a long-running debate over the role of creative imagination in writing about the Holocaust—a debate that may, in its intensity, be unique to this subject.

22. Many of the elements of this debate can be found in a lecture by Elie Wiesel at Northwestern University in 1977—just as an explosion of interest in the Holocaust would begin and an almost endless succession of survivor memoirs would be published. Wiesel addresses the role of “literary inspiration” in writing about the Holocaust:

Ask any survivor and he will tell you, and his children will tell you. He or she who did not live through the event will never know it. And he or she who did live through the event will never reveal it. Not entirely. Not really. Between our memory and its reflection there stands a wall that cannot be pierced. The past belongs to the dead and the survivor does not recognize himself in the words linking him to them. We speak in code, we survivors, and this code cannot be broken, cannot be deciphered, not by you, no matter how much you try. A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka. (*Dimensions* 7)

Wiesel speaks of “Treblinka” in direct reference to the controversy over Jean-François Steiner’s *Treblinka* that had begun a decade earlier: “How can one write a novel about the Holocaust? ... How can one convince himself without feeling guilty that he may use such events for literary purposes?” (7).

23. Although the points are not made explicitly or developed very much in the lecture, Wiesel touches on a number of the elements that would continue to be touchstones in debates about writing—especially fiction—about the Holocaust: the challenges of representing the Holocaust adequately through writing; the primacy of survivor testimony; the appropriateness of creative imagination or the writer’s craft in writing about the Holocaust; and even the danger that fictional treatments of the Holocaust will play into the hands of Holocaust deniers and revisionists.[\[10\]](#) A full treatment of these issues is beyond the scope of this essay,[\[11\]](#) but brief commentary on some of these issues may be useful to provide some sense of how and why writers have come to terms with their use of fiction to represent the Holocaust.

24. Decades of Holocaust writing, literary analysis and scholarship have challenged the validity of the dichotomy that Wiesel establishes between eyewitness testimony and fiction, but for many survivor/writers, the distinction was not important in the first place. Imre Kertész, the Nobel Prize-winning author who survived a succession of camps as a teenager, produced a work, *Fatelessness*, that is typically referred to as a “semi-autobiographical novel,” although Kertész himself called it a “novel” and disassociated it from anything having to do with autobiography. Indeed, following the release of the film adaptation (*Fateless*), for which he wrote the screenplay, Kertész asserted that “the film is more autobiographical than the book ... I’m not even sure if I wrote the screenplay from memories or from memories of the book.” (Riding) [\[12\]](#)

25. Wiesel’s own memoir *Night* is, in the words of Ruth Franklin, “an imperfect ambassador

for the infallibility of the memoir, owing to the fact that it has been treated very often as a novel—by journalists, by scholars, and even by its publishers” (71) Wrangling over how to label the work is the result in part of the fact that in the different editions of the work (it was originally published in Yiddish in Buenos Aires in 1956, then translated into French in a drastically shortened edition in 1958; the French version was then translated into English in 1960 and republished in a new English translation by Wiesel’s wife Marion in 2006), certain key incidents are recounted differently. These variations (Wiesel defended them as “corrections”) do not diminish the power of the work, but they are extremely important for understanding the role of artistic license in a memoir:

Wiesel recognizes the memoirist’s dual obligation—to the truth, certainly, but also to tell his story ... in the most interesting, most memorable, most meaningful way possible. Like the translator who occasionally veers from the phrasing of an individual line for the sake of the work as a whole, the memoirist too must be at liberty to shape the raw materials into a work of art. (Franklin 78-9)

26. Janina Bauman, author of the memoir *Winter in the Morning*, argues that this artistic liberty must be applied to the whole enterprise of a memoir/autobiography. Bauman, who as a teenager survived two years in the Warsaw Ghetto and another two years in hiding among the Christian population on the “Aryan side,” did not speak about her ordeal, even to family and friends, for forty years. Her mother’s death made her realize that she was the last living member of her family who could preserve the memory of what her family had endured and pay tribute to all the Poles who had helped her and others to survive.

27. Bauman describes how, once she decided to recall the past, the memories came out in a flood. But she understood that her memoir needed to be more than a record of all the thoughts and feelings that she was recalling:

Unlike a diary or a journal, to make sense and be readable an autobiography must have a story-structure: it has to read like a novel. There is no point in overloading it with details that we manage to remember in abundance if they don’t help to convey a message, to describe the characters involved, to render the atmosphere or build up dramatic tension. The author must first decide what is the purpose of her writing, what she wants to tell the readers ... In other words: to write an autobiography is to discover, even to create a meaningful pattern in one’s own past. The memories need to be selected according to this pattern ... in order to build the narrative the author has to fill the blanks, link the single bits with each other in a smooth and plausible way. Here comes imagination helped by a sense of probability: it could have been so. *No autobiography can be written without such a touch of fiction.* (31). [Emphasis added]

Bauman’s statement goes a long way toward explaining why, despite their fundamental documentary value, Holocaust diaries and eyewitness testimony (especially when produced during or immediately following liberation) are often difficult to read, and frankly not very appealing to those with a casual, non-scholarly interest in the Holocaust. As contemporaneous, or near contemporaneous, accounts, they are produced before the witness recognizes a pattern in his or her experiences, before an individual experience can be related to the larger context of the event as a whole.

28. Over the decades, Holocaust scholars have revealed much about the discrepancy between experience and memory and have demonstrated that the boundaries between history, memory and representation are often highly blurred. It is important to remember that a very large

majority of Holocaust survivor memoirs were not written until decades after the end of the war—a market for such works barely existed until the late 1970s and the 1980s—and the passage of time often produces flawed memory, especially in the case of child survivors who do not talk or write about their experiences until late adulthood. In addition, memoirs and other forms of survivor testimony often suppress or alter information that would be embarrassing or self-incriminating (or that would cast family members or acquaintances in a negative light); as Primo Levi explains it in *The Drowned and the Saved*, this is sometimes conscious, sometimes not, but often in part the effect of time:

Many survivors of war or other complex and traumatic experiences tend unconsciously to filter their memory: summoning their memories they prefer to dwell on moments of respite, on grotesque, strange or relaxed intermezzos, and to skim over the most painful episodes which are not called up willingly from the reservoir of memory and therefore with time tend to ... lose their contours. (32)

There are also several reasons why a survivor memoir may incorporate, unwittingly or not, incidents or observations that are part of the collective memory of the Holocaust to which the survivor may have been exposed through other survivor testimony or through films. This is one of the reasons that historians have been very cautious about, and in some cases opposed to, using survivor testimony. (Browning 2003).

29. Wiesel's 1977 lecture implies that the story of the camps is for survivors to tell. In other words, those who were there have proprietary rights to the story of the camps. Interestingly, the most direct statement of these rights to the Holocaust comes not from a survivor, but from Melvin Jules Bukiet, the child of survivors:

To be shabbily proprietary, we own it. Our parents owned it, and they gave it to us. [...] I'd like to tell everyone from the [Saul] Bellows and the [Cynthia] Ozicks to the [William] Styrons and the [Binjamin] Wilkomirskis, "Bug off. Find your own bad news," but no one can legislate artistic temperament, and perhaps no one should." (16-7)

At the same time that Wiesel was arguing the primacy of memoir over fiction, the American writer Cynthia Ozick, who was in high school in New York during World War II, wrote two stories, "The Shawl" and "Rosa." They were completed in 1977 but not submitted for publication until several years later. The delay between composition and publication was the result in large part of Ozick's fear, as she stated in a 1989 interview, of "making art out of the Holocaust," [13] of "mytho-poeticizing, making little stories out of a torrent of truth." Ozick worried that "this subject is corrupted by fiction and that fiction in general corrupts history" (Heron). Eventually, Ozick would argue that the need to preserve a collective memory of the Holocaust justified a broader definition of "witness" to include writers like herself who were not survivors.

30. More than three decades later, Patrick Hicks himself wrestled with the issue of "authenticity," of his right to write about the Holocaust. His eventual decision echoes Ozick's assertion that writers can and should bear witness:

I believe we all have a responsibility to bear witness to genocide. And while the perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust were overwhelming German and Jewish, respectively, it is, at its heart, a human story. It horrifies me to the marrow of my being that we are capable of doing this to each other. And, when I think of what stories I could focus on as a writer, there is no other story more important than the Holocaust. It looms over us.

It haunts our understanding of what it means to be civilized and human. Even today, some seventy years after darkness swallowed up Europe, we're still reeling from the loss of all those people. ... I'm horrorstruck that this was allowed to happen and that more wasn't done to stop it. That should be something we all worry about. It's not just about being Jewish or German—this affects us all, it stains us all. We need to bear witness and remember. (Wingate Par. 10) [14]

This role of writers in bearing witness, even if they themselves were not literally witnesses, has been linked to the power of stories. Fiction, whether closely or loosely based on primary sources, can give us a way to see and feel history that other genres cannot offer. Jean Hatzfeld, the author of a series of books about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda that are based in large part on interviews with convicted *génocidaires* and with survivors, asserts that “there are different types of writing, which belong to different times. There is the journalist who is often first on the ground, then scientists or specialists, and then writers whose works correspond to a different kind of reading.” He goes on to say that “I work with reality, by preparing my conversations with people, and after the literary construction of my books, some images or emotions or thoughts may appear that a journalist or historian would not produce.” (Ivry) In another recent interview, Hatzfeld makes this point even more strongly, using as his example a book by Nobel Prize-winning author Patrick Modiano: “*Dora Bruder* teaches us nothing new about the Occupation or about French collaboration, the deportations, or the suffering of the victims. But it triggers a feeling that no historian’s work can provoke.” (Papy) [Translation by reviewer]

31. David Albahari makes this point about stories as a form of representation distinct from eyewitness accounts and historical scholarship. Albahari’s *Götz and Meyer* uses a variety of sources, including newspaper articles from the time and two pieces of historical scholarship, to recount an unnamed survivor’s struggle to piece together the history of the Semlin concentration camp outside of Belgrade and the use of a mobile gas van to murder all the Jews interned there in Spring 1942. In an “Author’s Note” following the narrative, Albahari asserts that his work should not be confused with history: “A story ... is never history, and it respects the facts only insofar as those facts suit the story” (169)

32. Although Albahari argues that “stories” and “history” are accountable to different standards, we can still ask whether a “story” about the Holocaust should, as much as possible, work within the confines of historical veracity and plausibility or whether history can be treated more as a starting point from which a fictional narrative takes flight. Can a work of fiction about the Holocaust use history to create a story, or should it use narrative for the primary purpose of introducing readers to history? Or, as I believe it to be the case with *The Commandant of Lubizec*, can a work do both?

The Narrator of *The Commandant of Lubizec*

33. *The Commandant of Lubizec* has multiple aims, and these are pursued through the use of a narrator with multiple identities, or roles. In an October 2014 radio interview (Halbloom), Hicks explained that the “voice of the narrator” came to him early on, within the first few hours in his writing of the book, and that enabled him to make progress on a work that at one point later on he had to put aside because of the emotional intensity of the project. Hicks insists that the narrator is not himself (Hicks), yet he would acknowledge, I am sure, that the narrator’s talents and perspectives converge perfectly with his own. Hicks identifies three key roles of the narrator—storyteller, historian or history professor, and memorializer of lost lives—and much of the book’s novelty and power derives from the seamless performance by the narrator

of these roles.

34. The narrator of *The Commandant of Lubizec* is first and foremost a storyteller, and the main narrative is the story of Hans-Peter Guth, born in Hamburg on January 1, 1900 (as old as the twentieth century itself, his mother would often joke). A former altar boy, he lied about his age to join the Germany army, witnessed the horrors of Passchendaele, became enraged by Germany's postwar humiliation and joined the Nazi Party in 1931. Less than a decade later, he is assigned to Lubizec and turns it into an ever more efficient killing factory. The narrator brings us all the way to the post-World War II era and the final chapters in Guth's story. Guth is a case study, and his life a microcosm, of the Nazi regime and the history that produced and shaped it, and interwoven into this narrative is a history of Lubizec and the Operation Reinhard camps. One of Hicks' techniques for merging fiction and history is to cast the narrator in a second role, that of a history professor.

35. Hicks has explained how he wanted to make his novel an entryway for those who might be inspired to go beyond Lubizec and into the history of these camps:

I ... knew at an early stage that I wanted the narrator to sprinkle in footnotes and cite historical documents throughout the story. Many of the books and interviews that appear in my novel are real, so readers can follow the narrator's trail of breadcrumbs if they want to find out more about Operation Reinhard, which I hope they do. All of this makes it read like nonfiction. It's almost as if Lubizec were a real place. (Wingate Par. 9)

Hicks' method is to use authoritative historical sources and personal accounts, including some about Auschwitz-Birkenau (which was not an Operation Reinhard camp per se, but which ultimately became the most lethal of the six death camps that the Nazis established in occupied Poland through the construction in 1942 of the Birkenau death camp), in three different ways: putting information from the sources into the mouths of the narrator and characters; citing the actual works in footnotes throughout the text that serve to reinforce the role of the narrator as history professor (and will cause some readers to ask themselves at various points whether they are reading fiction or history); and recasting historical sources, including eyewitness testimony, as (fictional) accounts of Lubizec.

36. The character of Guth is based in part of the life and thoughts of the historical commandant of Treblinka, Franz Stangl, who agreed to a series of interviews before and after his trial with the British journalist Gitta Sereny.^[15] These interviews, edited and published as *Into That Darkness*, are an invaluable case study of an individual and high-ranking perpetrator (although from the vantage point of more than a decade after the crimes were committed), yet they cannot reveal what it was like to experience a death camp as a "prisoner" — both the tiny percentage who were kept alive, at least for a short time, to do the necessary labor in the camp (maintaining the camp, disposing of bodies) and the rest, whose lives typically ended within an hour or so of their arrival on the platform of the station. Nor can we learn from camp personnel about the perspectives of members of the family of a camp commandant or civilians living in the vicinity of the death camp.

37. Most of the books and interviews cited in the novel are based on actual sources. Thus, *The Hell of Lubizec* (the memoir written by one of the key characters in the book, the prisoner Chaim Zischer), draws from Treblinka survivor Chil Rajchman's *The Last Jew of Treblinka* as well as Vasily Grossman's *The Hell of Treblinka*. Fictitious radio interviews, public speeches and other accounts by Zischer and by Dov Damiel, the other main character to survive the prisoner revolt in Lubizec, draw some of their content from the memories of Auschwitz-

Birkenau survivor Philip Gans, whom Hicks met with and interviewed several times. And although there is no explicit mention by Hicks of any specific source, *The Commandant's Daughter*, a fictitious memoir by Sigi, Guth's daughter, can be related to numerous accounts of children of camp commandants and other high-ranking SS and other Nazi officials, such as Monika Hertwig's memories of her father, the notorious Amon Goeth (of "Schindler's List" infamy), in the 2006 documentary "Inheritance."[\[16\]](#)

38. The grounding of the novel in historical sources goes even further. It's no coincidence that the surnames (Franz, Niemann, Oberhauser) of some of the officers in Lubizec are identical to those of SS men who worked in the historical Operation Reinhard camps.[\[17\]](#) But it would be as wrong to see *The Commandant of Lubizec*, or to try to read it, as a *roman à clef* as it would to read it without regard to the history on which the fictional Lubizec is based. This is because Hicks views fiction not simply as a vehicle for presenting history, but as a means to frame our understanding of Operation Reinhard—and the Nazi genocide as a whole—in ways that other kinds of writing, including first-hand testimony and historical analysis, cannot or do not do. There is perhaps no better example of this technique than Chapter 16, entitled "Passover."

39. In January 1943 Guth is encouraged by a newly arrived officer to provide entertainment by having the prisoners enact a Passover *seder*, a ceremony that will soon disappear along with the entire Jewish presence in Europe. Guth and other officers arrive drunk at the prisoners' barrack and select a number of prisoners to perform the *seder* with food and wine they have brought. When Chaim Zischer, one of the prisoners, points out that Passover isn't until April, Guth responds, "Do it now. You won't be here in April." Hicks was originally going to have the prisoners celebrate Passover secretly as an act of defiance—as actually occurred in Dachau and other camps—but he decided for several reasons to have Guth and his officers force the prisoners to do it (Hicks). In this way he could expose Guth's and the others' almost total ignorance of the way of life they were seeking to destroy; in Guth's words, "We want to see your Jew rituals and how you celebrate—what's the damn thing called again?" (or, as Zischer thinks about it, "The Germans destroyed without bothering to learn the basics of what they hated. It made no sense. What was the wellspring of their hatred?")

40. In addition, the *seder*, as created in the chapter, becomes the turning point in the narrative. The first act of defiance is the reciting by one of the prisoners of the *kaddish*, or prayer for the dead (which of course the Germans didn't recognize as such), which has everything to do with Lubizec but nothing to do with the celebration of Passover, a commemoration, as Zischer thinks about it, of "not only the bondage of his people in Egypt thousands of years ago, but ... also a reminder of how death passed over his ancestors. It was about hope and survival. Above all else, it was about the exodus of his people from slavery into freedom" (168).

41. The prisoners know this, but not their tormentors; thus the first shift in power. Then, spurred by the ridicule and humiliation heaped on them by Guth and his officers and by Guth's chilling statement about April, a small group of prisoners resolves to seize control of their own fate (mirroring the uprisings in Treblinka and Sobibór in August and October 1943).

42. Fictional imagination is also a key ingredient in the narrator's third role as a memorializer of lost lives. Hicks, through his narrator, can make the novel do what scholarly accounts typically do not do: step away from the large patterns of history and evoke the lives of the victims. The work is in part a sustained and unfailingly respectful evocation of the lives of the normally nameless victims—note that the novel is dedicated to "The Unknown"—as living human beings; so, for example, we learn about the meeting, courtship and happy years in the marriage of Chaim and Nela Zischer, and we can no longer think of Zischer only in the identity

of “prisoner” forced upon him in Lubizec.

43. Certainly the most compelling example of memorialization in *The Commandant of Lubizec* is the description of death in the gas chamber (Chapter 6). No one lived to tell what it was like to be locked in a gas chamber in an Operation Reinhard camp[18], so Hicks (and we) must try to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the music teacher David Stawczinski, of Gisela Wilenberg and her daughters, and of all the other named and unnamed victims who died on one particular day in the summer of 1942 in Lubizec—people who for Guth were “just numbers” (75), but who, as the narrator points out, are the story of the Holocaust that is typically omitted:

The absolute unrelenting horror of the Holocaust is dulled because we know that eyewitness accounts by their very nature are stories of life. But Lubizec was not a place of life. It was a place of clockwork murder and annihilation. To understand it we need to read hundreds of thousands of stories just like David Stawczinski’s, and then we need to imagine each of them dying. (71)

Even so, this attempt on the part of Hicks/the narrator to restore individuality and identity to those whom we often hear referred to as the countless, nameless victims—note that the novel is dedicated to “The Unknown”—provides only the most fragmentary view of these characters, but knowing how and why Hicks went about creating these minor characters tells us a lot about his aims and technique:

I spent [a long time] coming up with identities and foibles and desires for so many of these characters that enter Lubizec and are dead within fifty minutes. I wanted the reader to feel *wounded* that these souls had been taken from us ... Technically speaking, they are minor characters who only exist in the novel for a few pages, but I spent hours and hours giving them rich histories. And in some cases, I didn’t put everything I knew about them onto the page. For example, there are two brothers, Jerzy and Jozek Blatt, who run a bookstore in Lublin, and I knew so much about them. The whole chapter could have been just about them. I did this for many other characters too. I created long histories for these so-called minor characters because I felt that if *I* didn’t care about them, why would the reader care about them? And although they are fictional, they help me to imagine the real victims so much better. Now, when I see photos of people getting off a train at Auschwitz, I can almost see Jerzy and Jozek Blatt at the very back, holding their suitcases and adjusting their tortoiseshell eyeglasses. I hope the reader might feel this way too. [Wingate Par. 16]

Of course, only so much can be done to represent the fullness of the lives of those who perished in the Holocaust. It is a fundamental limitation of any effort to recreate lives, whether in the pages of a memoir or a history book or a work of fiction. Daniel Mendelsohn, who embarked on a long journey, physically and metaphorically, to discover the fate of his great-uncle, his great-aunt and their four children—“six of six million” is how the subtitle of *The Lost* identifies them—from Bolechow, Ukraine, arrived at the end of his quest with few certainties:

As I stood ... in the place where they had died, where the life that I would never know had gone out of the bodies I had never seen, and precisely because I had never known them or seen them I was reminded the more forcefully that they had been specific people with specific deaths, and those lives and deaths belonged to them, not me, no matter how gripping the story that may be told about them. There is so much that will always be *impossible to know*, but we do know that they were, once, themselves, *specific*, the

subjects of their own lives and deaths, and not simply puppets to be manipulated for the purposes of a good story, for the memoirs and magical-realist novels and movies ... There will be time enough for that, once I and everyone who ever knew everyone who ever knew them dies; since, as we know, everything, in the end, gets lost.” (Mendelsohn 502)

In addition to being a storyteller, historian (or history professor) and memorializer of lost lives, the narrator plays another role that overlays the others and that is revealed in part by many of the footnotes in the text. In fact, only a few of the ten footnotes in *The Commandant of Lubizec* that create the illusion of a piece of scholarly writing would ever appear in the form they do in a straightforward historical account. The others are of a different kind, since the narrator is also a commentator, directing readers to pause at certain points in the narrative and to think about the characters from particular perspectives. The narrator thus provides us with a meta-view of the work, frequently underscoring the challenges and limitations of representing the Holocaust.

44. In making the narrator a commentator, Hicks allows us—even forces us—to share his struggle with and emotional investment in the subject matter he has committed himself to representing. So, for example, as we read about the growing tension between Guth and his wife Jasmine, who is so frustrated by Guth’s refusal to tell her what Lubizec really is that she threatens to take their children with her back to Berlin, the narrator demands that we focus not only on the subplot of the marital discord between Guth and Jasmine, but on the significance of how she writes about it in her (fictitious) unpublished diary:

We want Jasmine to be outraged that her husband is killing people on an industrialized scale, but instead she is angry that Guth is totally disinterested in the two of them being a married couple. She wants a shared life but he is distant, aloof, and slippery. While she may have qualms about “burning people” in Lubizec ... it isn’t the killing that bothers her—it’s the burning of corpses. How the corpses came into existence hasn’t crossed her mind yet. This is why she can say, “You’re burning people in there” and not “You’re killing people in there.” It is an alarming gap in her thinking. At no time does she wonder about the thousands of people murdered at Lubizec, and this makes reading Jasmine’s diary obscene. (116)

Later in the novel, the narrator focuses our attention on the fundamental moral flaw in the description by Guth’s daughter Sigi, in her fictitious 1985 memoir, of the reunion of Guth and his family when they return from Berlin to Lubizec:

Sigi devotes a whole chapter of *The Commandant’s Daughter* to this reunion, and it is very difficult to read, not just because she writes with such effervescent joy about seeing her father again, but also because there is no mention of the death camp at all. Even though a kingdom of murder was only a few kilometers away, she never mentions it. It’s like the place never existed. When she was eleven years old she might not have thought much about Lubizec during this welcome home party (she was, after all, a young girl absorbed in her own little universe), but *as an adult* Sigi makes absolutely no reference to the camp during this long chapter of homecoming. [emphasis added] This is a problem. A rather large problem. It’s as if Sigi has blocked it out because she didn’t want to see her father a man who turned people into ash. (187)

Elsewhere the narrator directs commentary at us readers rather than chastising the characters. Toward the beginning of the book, the narrator insists on our understanding the variety of forms of participation in mass murder:

This, we should note, is the face of evil, this studious man working late into the evening. In any other setting he would just be a building site manager, but Guth was a true believer in Nazi ideology as well as an excellent administrator. With his typewriter and pen he was able to kill hundreds of thousands of people. We must never forget that killing took on many forms in the Holocaust and that these crimes weren't confined to a single place like a gas chamber. Guth was very good at his job. His desk became a weapon of mass destruction. (13-14)

In the chapter that describes the aftermath of the prisoner revolt and escape, the narrator points out that the fate of many of the prisoners, including David Grinbaum, who weren't captured and whose bodies were never found, is unknown:

Maybe [David] wasn't blasted into mist by a landmine and maybe he survived the war. Maybe he started life over again and erased the word *Lubizec* from his vocabulary. This is possible. Anything is possible. Is it very likely, though? *How we answer this question says much about our sense of hope* [emphasis added]. (217)

But perhaps the most powerful use of this role of the narrator as commentator is to acknowledge that despite all he attempts to do with *The Commandant of Lubizec*, Hicks recognizes and emphasizes the limitations and ultimately the inadequacy of writing to represent the nature of Lubizec and the crimes and suffering that took place there and, more broadly, in all of the sites of the Holocaust. This is a concern voiced by Holocaust survivors and victims themselves—for instance, by Chaim Kaplan, whose Warsaw Ghetto diary has been published in English as *The Scroll of Agony*—all the way through the work of Primo Levi (*Survival in Auschwitz*), Art Spiegelman (*Maus*), Daniel Mendelsohn (*The Lost*) and others. It's the limitation of all representation, all the more so when the effort seeks to introduce the viewer or the reader to an event so traumatic and beyond normal experience as to be “unimaginable.”

45. “Words fail us. Language fails us. Our own imaginations fail us” (26). The narrator argues that the challenge, or dilemma, in constructing this event through artistic creation is that any representation is a presence that is attempting to account for the end result of the Holocaust: absence.^[19] Hicks asserts that a language of “destruction and absence” is needed:

Perhaps the best way to understand the Holocaust is to imagine a giant book and then watch it get erased, word by word. If you flip through the pages of this book—this very book you are holding right now—if you thumb through it and imagine each individual word getting erased, as if it were a life, then, perhaps, maybe, we might have a language that begins to explain what happened. (As a point of reference, this book holds over 81,000 words, but if each of these words were to represent a human life, that is still only a tiny percentage of the millions who disappeared under the Nazis.) Thus, in order to describe the Holocaust in any meaningful way, we need a language that isn't there. We need to think of absence. We need to imagine words being erased. Murdered. (26)

It is a theme that the narrator returns, in one case, toward the end of the book, pointing out that Chaim Zischer recognized the inadequacy of language in *The Hell of Lubizec*:

Zischer goes on to explain that literary and artistic mediums break down when we approach the Holocaust. He reminds us that words like “appalling” and “horrible” only take us so far when we try to understand these camps. It is a story without hope because people came in at one end and truckloads of ash came out at the other. But how can we

explain such things through words? Whenever we try to do this, we find ourselves in a world where the old ways of storytelling do not apply. (229)[20]

46. Vasily Grossman, a war correspondent for the Red Army newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star), wrote eyewitness accounts of the battles of Moscow, Stalingrad and Kursk. Already in 1943 he had begun collecting first-hand accounts from individuals who had witnessed what we now call the Holocaust. On July 24, 1944, Grossman was present at the Soviet liberation of the Majdanek extermination camp, the first camp to be liberated by the Allies. On August 16 he arrived at the site of Treblinka. The gas chambers had been dismantled during the previous winter, and the camp plowed under. Prior to their retreat ahead of the Soviet advance, the Germans burned several nearby villages. Grossman reported on what living witnesses told him, but he also reported what he himself could see: “The earth is casting up fragments of bone, teeth, sheets of paper, clothes, things of all kinds. The earth does not want to keep secrets” (Grossman 159). His report (later used as testimony at the Nuremberg Tribunal) described the crimes that had taken place in the abandoned camp as “a story so unreal that it seems like the product of insanity and delirium” (158).

47. Despite all he had seen in more than three years as a war correspondent, Treblinka left Grossman overwhelmed:

We walk on over the swaying, bottomless earth of Treblinka and suddenly come to a stop. Thick wavy hair, gleaming like burnished copper, the delicate lovely hair of a young woman, trampled into the ground; and beside it, some equally fine blond hair; and the some heavy black plaits on the bright sand; and then more and more...Evidently these are the contents of a sack, just a single sack that somehow got left behind. Yes, it is all true. The last hope, the last wild hope that it was all just a terrible dream, has gone ... And it feels as if your heart must come to a stop now, gripped by more sorrow, more grief, more anguish that any human being can endure. (160)

Even though Operation Reinhard took place many decades ago and the three death camps have been all been turned into memorials (albeit in very different ways), almost anyone visiting these sites will feel something akin to what Grossman describes. Patrick Hicks emphasizes this whenever he talks about his own research trips to the camps. One of the many achievements of *The Commandant of Lubizec* is its ability to evoke in readers who are removed in time and space from Treblinka (and Bełżec and Sobibór) those feelings of utter discomfort and disorientation—and to do that within the structure of a coherent and compelling narrative. The novel, by design, offers no safe zones to which readers can retreat. It offers us no vicarious sense of triumph in the narration of the revolt or in the memories of the prisoners who escaped alive, nor does it offer a false message of redemption.

48. *The Commandant of Lubizec* ends in 2008 with Chaim Zischer, the last living survivor, sobbing before a stone monument in a ceremony marking the sixty-fifth anniversary of the uprising. His sole consolation was the presence of his children and grandchildren. To them, as to Zischer—and to us—Lubizec “cries ... from the ground and haunts our understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to be civilized” (243).[21]

Patrick Hicks, *The Commandant of Lubizec: A Novel of the Holocaust and Operation Reinhard*, Steerforth Press, 2014, paper ISBN 9781586422202, 256 pages, \$16,
<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/232414/the-commandant-of-lubizec-by-patrick-hicks/9781586422202/> [1]

¹ A parallel phenomenon exists in Germany, where, as Julia Klein puts it, “the so-called Third Generation has been reckoning with the deeds of their grandparents and with their parents’ silence and shame.” [\[return to text\]](#)

² Heydrich died in June 1942 from injuries in the aftermath of an attempted assassination by Czech partisans. [\[return to text\]](#)

³ A number of forced-labor and other camps in the Lublin District of German-occupied Poland, including Poniatowa, Trawniki and Lublin/Majdanek, were used in Operation Reinhard, but at least 1.5 million of the estimated 1.7 persons murdered in Operation Reinhard perished in Treblinka, Bełżec or Sobibór. (USHMM) [\[return to text\]](#)

⁴ Nor do most people realize that the mass murder by the *Einsatzgruppen* of perhaps as many as two million civilians, including some 1.3 million Jews in the wake of the advance of the Germany army into the western Soviet Union beginning in late June 1941, accounts for roughly another quarter of the six million. (Rhodes) [\[return to text\]](#)

⁵ Clemens August Graf von Galen (1878-1946), Bishop of Munster, wrote three sermons in July and August 1941 that spoke out against the lawlessness and terror of the Gestapo, the continuing assault by the Nazi regime on the churches and the euthanasia program being carried out on the mentally ill. The third of these sermons, distributed illegally, broke the veil of secrecy of the euthanasia program, known as *Aktion T-4*, and had, in the words of Lipton, “a greater impact than any other one statement in consolidating anti-'euthanasia' sentiment” (94). [\[return to text\]](#)

⁶ The mass shooting of the Jews of Jozefów in the Lublin District of eastern Poland is the subject of Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. [\[return to text\]](#)

⁷ Experiments with mobile gas vans of a variety of types began in 1940 in the Soldau concentration camp on mental patients from East Prussia and Pomerania; on a large scale during the German invasion of the Soviet Union; in late 1941 on Soviet prisoners in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp north of Berlin and on Jews and Roma in the Chelmno concentration camp north of Lodz, Poland; and in the spring of 1942 on Jews in the Semlin concentration camp outside of Belgrade — this latter experiment making Serbia *judenrein*, that is, with no remaining Jewish population. [\[return to text\]](#)

⁸ The final stage (and like the two that preceded it, overlapping the previous stages) was the use of Zyklon B — a brand name for hydrogen cyanide (prussic acid) pellets that changed into lethal gas when exposed to air. Experiments were first conducted at Auschwitz in September 1941 on some 600 Soviet prisoners of war and 250 ill prisoners. This was the method of mass killing used at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek and elsewhere from 1942 on — but never in the Operation Reinhard camps. [\[return to text\]](#)

⁹ Important testimony also came from civilians, most notably that of Franciszek Ząbecki, a dispatcher employed by the Reichsbahn and a member of the Polish resistance, the *Armia Krajowa*, or Home Army. Ząbecki testified at the trials of German war criminals, including SS

officer Kurt Franz, and the commandant of the Treblinka extermination camp, Franz Stangl. The evidence included original German waybills produced by the Reichsbahn, which proved that the *Güterwagen* [freight cars] crammed with prisoners on the way to Treblinka extermination camp were returning empty. Ząbecki secretly stole a batch of waybills in 1944 from the control house to serve as physical proof of the ongoing extermination program. From July 1942 until the end of war, Ząbecki regularly delivered his reports about the trains to the Polish government-in-exile. (Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team; Ząbecki) [\[return to text\]](#)

¹⁰ The concern about Holocaust fiction is that it opens the door to Holocaust deniers, who spare no effort to discover contradictions and inconsistencies in Holocaust survivors' accounts. The spread of fictional writing about the Holocaust would in effect embolden deniers even further, who could argue that if authors can create plausible fiction about the Holocaust, perhaps the entire event is a fiction. Thus the enormous concern with fake memoirs, most notoriously Benjamin Wilkomirski *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, which won critical acclaim before it was revealed to be a fabrication. Other memoirs that were initially acclaimed and then revealed as hoaxes include Monique de Wael's *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (1997) and Herman Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love That Survived* (2009, cancelled), in which the author, an actual Holocaust survivor, invented the story that while he was a prisoner in Buchenwald, a young girl from the outside would pass him food through the fence daily and that years later they met by accident and later married. [\[return to text\]](#)

¹¹ A valuable recent overview of these issues can be found in Franklin. [\[return to text\]](#)

¹² Although Kertész does not share Wiesel's 1977 view of the nature of a memoir, he does agree with Wiesel about the impossibility of fully imagining the nature of the camps. In 1989, Wiesel asserted (again) that "Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so." In *Fateless*, Kertész's literary alter ego Gyuri Köves understands that no one who did not share his experience would be able to imagine it:

But who can judge what is possible or believable in a concentration camp? Who could explore, exhaust all those countless ideas, inventions, games, jokes, and ponderable theories, which are easily accessible and transferable from a make-believe world of fantasy into a concentration-camp reality? You couldn't, even if you mustered the totality of your knowledge. (148)

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¹³ Chandler explains the issue as follows:

One difficulty that faces anyone writing about the Shoah is the question of "aestheticizing" the death camps. It goes without saying that few writers addressing the Shoah consciously set out to create something beautiful. Nevertheless, most writers wish to write clearly, vividly, and powerfully. If a writer succeeds in these aims, his or her work will inevitably take on a certain beauty and begin to live a life of its own. There is then a danger that the subject matter—*no matter no how terrible it may be*—will somehow be transcended, that it will be left behind and forgotten. This fear of transcendence is a driving force behind much of the later work of Paul Celan. (296)

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¹⁴ In a later interview, Hicks described himself as “an Irish Catholic kid from Stillwater, Minnesota [who] grew up in a river town” with no family connection to the Holocaust. He asserted his right to tell the story of Lubizec in this way:

I started with the viewpoint of, well, I’m not Jewish, but I am a father, I’m a son, and an uncle, and what would it mean if everyone that I loved had been annihilated? So I started with the idea of, I’m a human being, and I’ll start from there, and once I made that realization, the story really blossomed open for me. (Halbloom)

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¹⁵ Another source for the construction of the character of Guth is *Commandant of Auschwitz: The Autobiography of Rudolf Hoess*. Hoess was the commandant of Auschwitz during much of its history, from 1940-3 and then again in 1944-5. [\[return to text\]](#)

¹⁶ Indeed, books, films and other accounts by children and other descendants of Nazi perpetrators are quite numerous, and continue to be produced, most recently in the 2015 memoir by Jennifer Teege, *My Grandfather Would Have Shot Me*. [\[return to text\]](#)

¹⁷ Compare Rudolf Oberhauser, guard at Lubizec, with Josef Oberhauser, the only SS officer to be convicted of war crimes in Bełżec; Peter Franz (“Birdie”), SS officer at Lubizec, with Kurt Franz, one of the commandants of Treblinka; and Heinrich Niemann, SS officer at Lubizec, with Johann Niemann, deputy commandant at Sobibór and the highest-ranking officer on duty in the camp on October 14, 1943, when the prisoner uprising took place. Niemann was the first person targeted to be assassinated by the prisoners and was killed in the tailor's barrack with an axe to his head by Alexander Shubayev, a Jewish Belorussian Red Army soldier who had been imprisoned at Sobibór as a prisoner of war.) [\[return to text\]](#)

¹⁸ This is another fundamental problem in writing about the Holocaust and other atrocity crimes:

The only true witnesses, the only witnesses who experienced the full truth of the camps, are the dead, those who can no longer speak to us. Primo Levi voiced this concern more than once. And Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote with regard to the Gulag that “all those who drank of this most deeply, who learned the meaning of it most fully, are already in the grave and will not tell us. No one will now ever tell us the *most important thing* about these camps.” (Chandler 296)

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¹⁹ This argument that a representation of the Holocaust is a presence that must paradoxically (and problematically) construct a narrative, or image, of absence was made in regard to visual art by Holocaust art curator and historian Stephen Feinstein; see, for example, *Absence/Presence: Essays and Reflections on the Artistic Memory of the Holocaust*. [\[return to text\]](#)

²⁰ In fact, the narrator goes even further, arguing that the inadequacy of language to describe events may be coupled with an aversion (on the part of both the writer and readers) to visualize

the operation of the death camps, for example, the mass burning of bodies that in Lubicec are called “The Roasts” (87). [\[return to text\]](#)

²¹ During the time that this essay was written and edited, two more survivors of the Operation Reinhard camps passed away: Thomas (Toivi) Blatt, a survivor of Sobibór, on October 31, 2015, and Samuel Willenberg, the last living survivor of Treblinka, on February 19, 2016. [\[return to text\]](#).

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