

Two boys – one event

How memories are recalled in interviews about massive trauma

Suzanne Kaplan

*The background of this paper is an investigation of child survivors from the Holocaust; in a study of interviews of these survivors, it could be concluded that past traumatic experiences are recovered not as memories (in the usual sense of the word), but as affects invading the present. Accordingly, affects seem to tell the story of the past traumatic experiences. In this paper, the author investigates two accounts (separately told by two survivors) of the same event in the Kielce ghetto. The two accounts present similarities, but also differences, and the author discusses these in relation to the concepts of **historical and narrative truth**, as well as in relation to **construction and reconstruction**, concluding that the interviews give a sketch of how the experiences have become idiosyncratically registered in the minds of the interviewees.*

Key words: *trauma – Holocaust – memory – (re)construction*

Children were afflicted especially severely during the Holocaust. Only 11% of the Jewish children in the countries occupied by the Nazis survived (Dwork, 1991). Paradoxically, people who were children during the Holocaust have not considered their life histories important enough to describe for the very reason that they were children at the time. Owing to this background, I have seen it as especially essential to emphasize, examine and discuss aspects of childhood memories from massive traumas deriving from the Holocaust – both how survivors remember what they experienced and were influenced as children by the persecutions, and how it is for them as adults to live with these memories. Life histories recounted by persons who were present at the time of the historical events (i.e., when the original trauma took place) provide access to an important source of knowledge. According to the historian Ringelheim (1998), oral life histories give insights into the history of the Holocaust in a manner that we cannot achieve through documents or written accounts.

My interest in these issues grew in connection with a task I had as a coordinator and interviewer in Sweden for an international project, Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation; the aim of this project was to document as many testimonies as possible from the Holocaust from all over the world by videotaped interviews. As it turned out that 40 of the 330 interviewed Jewish survivors in Sweden had been persecuted as children (born 1929–39), I decided to study their life histories more extensively within the framework of a dissertation thesis, and with the child perspective of persecution experiences in focus.

The psychic development of the children involved often became complicated, particularly because children were the direct target of persecution – due to this, many were forced to become adults precociously. They were never actually able to be children or teenagers with access to parental care to internalize and transfer to the next generation in an optimal way. It has turned out that the child survivors have had difficulties in ex-

periencing the past as something one has left behind in order to get on with life. There seems to be an experience of time as compressed as if the past and the present exist simultaneously within the experienced self. I surmise that variations in each and every interviewee's manner of dealing with affects and memory images, both within one and the same interview and between different interviews, reflect the consequences of fragility in individual defenses due to personal experiences of the Holocaust, just as does the interaction with the respective interviewer (Kaplan, 2002).

DISRUPTED THINKING AND AFFECTS

Feelings are elicited by events, but, in the extremely traumatic situations which were recounted in this study, it does not seem to have been possible for the interviewees to be conscious of what they felt. They could only register what happened in the form of a panicky feeling in the body. "You didn't think" is an often heard comment. An interruption in thinking occurred. There was no space in which to think or any adult who could listen (function as a container for the child's experiences) and thereby help the child find words for what had happened (symbolize the event). In such cases, a perceptual image (of, e.g., a window) could be imprinted in the body and it is hard to leave the event behind as a memory – the experience remains as an inexpressible sense of discomfort in the body. That is an emotional reaction. The concept of affect is applicable here. It is used to describe the bodily aspect of the feeling that is elicited by external or internal stimuli (Nathanson, 1994; Lerner, 1999). For the interviewee, this means that there are both unconscious and conscious aspects of the affect. The original affect can take various pathways and it seems as though the affect can also arise instead of a thought. The established expression "invading memories" appears to be a contradiction, since memories are something that a person could think around and neutralize. What seems to be invading is the affect, the anxiety. My conclusion is that the concept should be "invading affects". Accordingly, in the main study (Kaplan, 2002), it has become clear that the traumatic experiences have become recorded in a specific way in the minds of the survivors; due to the traumatic upheaval, the experiences have not been recorded as memories in the usual sense of the word, but as a disruption in thinking and as a more-or-less distinct affect which may intrude later in life. The

trauma is thus imprinted as an affect, and the "memory" is a reproduction of this affect.

CONCEPTION OF TIME

The memory images are brought to the surface and are experienced at the very moment in the present with traces from the past. Affects can "spill over" the self (Matthis, 2002). The decisive factor seems to be to what extent the individual can differentiate between the present and the past, when emotions seem to be of the same nature. The degree of integration of the trauma appears to determine the way in which the memory takes form. A split in the self may also appear as a result of the difficulty of coping with memories from massive trauma. Laub & Auerhahn (1993, p. 291) describe this phenomenon by showing how fragments "are reawakened without the individual knowing that 'I', or the subject who experienced the event, is separable from the one who is reawakening it ... a breakdown of [the barrier between] these two takes place when the memory is reawakened without the reflecting self being present". The past and the present seem to exist at the same time. If the survivors try to remember things as a whole, they most probably cannot avoid realizing the totality of it all. This pain can be absolutely excruciating. When the survivors as children concentrated their attention on some object such as a hat or buttons, it was probably a way they had of diverting their attention from what was most painful. At the same time, as mentioned above, these perceptual images may function as cues to the traumatic event.

RETAINING SIGNIFICANCE AND CORE OF OUTER REALITY

Memory researchers of today agree that we do not store objective snapshots of our earlier experiences but retain significance, atmosphere and feelings which these experiences give us. At the same time, it is commonly agreed that even if recalled memories can be a restructured psychic reality, they still reflect a "core" of outer reality, of the historical events that took place. Characteristic of false memories is the fact that they are seldom recounted accompanied by feelings such as dread, horror and anxiety, i.e., the traumatic experience itself (Christianson, 1994). Memories from emotionally traumatic events like extreme repeated traumas, are often more "correct" than memories

from single traumatic events (Sandler & Fonagy, 1997).

I have assumed that massive trauma has influenced the child survivors in similar ways, irrespective of possible previous personality structures, due to the force of traumatization. At the same time, on another level, the developmental phase of the child at the time of the trauma, as well as experiences after the war as children and young adults – among other things the capacity to express painful experiences – may influence the recounting of their life histories in adulthood. Thus, the life histories both reflect a historical reality and each person's psychic reality. In the testimonies, we can get a picture of how traumatic events are transformed in individual ways to memory images and affects.

TWO BOYS – ONE EVENT

In the interview material of 40 child survivors, there proved to be sequences with two of the interviewees which seemed to concern the same event. As boys, both of them were involved in this event in connection with the deportation of a group of children. That the descriptions concern the same course of events is verified through significant clues in both accounts in addition to the fact that they refer to each other by name. There are both similarities and differences in the pictures from their memories. It can be said that when the two men bear witness to an event which has taken place, they do so based on *experiences* in their respective psychic realities. The interviews were conducted independently of each other, at different points in time. They were conducted by two different interviewers with me as the co-ordinator. First, I present the interview sequences concerning the event as verbatim as possible, after which I discuss similarities and differences in content, aspects of reconstruction and construction, and “historical truth” as well as “narrative truth”.

The interview sequences concern the deportation of a group of children from the Kielce ghetto. Kielce was a town north of Krakow which was occupied by the Germans in 1939. At that time, about 24,000 Jews lived there. The Kielce ghetto was established in April 1941 and thousands of Jews were forced to move there from many small towns in the surrounding area. The Jews worked for the Germans, but the Jewish population was reduced to 2000 as a result of the elimination of the ghetto in 1942. Jews who were

ill, and small children, were put to death before deportation of the healthy to death and concentration camps (Gutman, 1990, pp. 801–802). I will now present the accounts of the two boys. I call them Noa and Sam. Despite their escape, they were later captured and taken to Auschwitz. After liberation, they were sent to Sweden.

According to the accounts below, one of the boys was twelve and the other ten-years-old when the event took place. The two of them succeeded in hiding together with a third person. Both men describe there having been “some third person there,” but at the same time, it is with regard to this point that the life histories differ most markedly.

NOA, THE YOUNGER BOY GIVES HIS ACCOUNT

It was a sawmill. So they were going to close it and they sorted out everyone they did not need. And they lined everyone up ... with the old and the ill, women and children for themselves, children they thought were too little. And little by little they started to transport the children away somewhere, I don't know, but those children (snuffles).

What did they transport them with? It was with horse-drawn wagons or they had some sort of truck. It is Germans, that is, who picked them up and gradually transported them away as soon as they could fill up the wagon. So I tried to be last (silence). When I saw that ... I understood, you see (silence) that I had to run for my life ... or hide (snuffles) one way or another. So we stood ... I stood not far from a house there, so I ... It was open, so I moved slowly, and on the way there, I saw a couple more children I knew (silence) and asked them quickly if they ... wanted to come and hide (cries). No, they didn't want to, but instead, a boy went into that house with me. We ran in there fast and started searching for a place ... to hide. It was a fairly high house, I mean there were stairs going up, so we ran, and I took the other guy with me. His name was Sam. And when we went into that house we were surprised. We found an older man who was already staying in there in the house. He couldn't walk. He was alone, no one with him. You weren't allowed to be in those houses, but he had tried to hide. So he stayed seated on the staircase. We ran around and looked all over to find a possible hiding place. So we ran up as high as we could and there was an attic on top of another attic that was open. So we looked up there and we ... Sam, he lifted me up, very

strongly, could look in there. We thought that it was a good place to hide, just then, to escape the transport. We took the older man with us and we went ... one went up first to the attic and then we pulled up the older man. Don't know, he had a leg injury, so he had been thrown out, left to die. And we helped him get up to the attic and we hid there. After a while, it was quiet outside. They had taken all the children away, all the adults, everything in the work camp was totally silent, silent as the grave (sighs). Then it was night and we lay still up there, all three of us, myself, Sam and the older man. And there were dormers jutting out, openings that we crawled into. Then, as we lay there, an SS man came into the house and started searching around, to see if anyone was hiding inside. I don't know if he suspected something or if it was just a routine check. And we looked out and we squeezed ourselves in, we weren't so large so we squeezed ourselves into those openings, and then we saw a soldier stick his head through the opening into the attic. And he looked around, and as luck would have it, he was alone and he concluded that no one was up there, so he went away (sighs). And that was on that day, you see. And then it was totally silent and we were there and lay still during the night and we heard lots of shooting, the first night. It was probably people who had hidden and then tried to flee from the camp, and that camp, you could not flee from that camp. All of it, all around it, it was enclosed and secured with barbed wire and fences. Soldiers were placed everywhere around it so that no one could flee from the camp late at night. But we heard shots coming from different directions. So we lay there that night, and then we lay there the whole day, the next day. Then it was night again, and we heard scattered shots now and then, yes, that's right, the shots were from ... but that camp was guarded the whole time. Of course we got hungry, so Sam and I went down from that attic at night, we crawled on our stomachs, crawled on all fours, so to say, and looked in ... We searched the houses, they were utterly empty. We looked for something we could eat. The only thing we could find was old bread, very hard, it was as hard as a rock. But we found ... could take, or drink water then, when we were down there. And we crept on all fours as far as we could. We crawled around, and did not dare to go upright, you understand what I mean, because then we could be found out. So we went on like this as far as we could, and we fetched a little food, or bread for the man who was still in the attic. We went back

up, and by that time we had eaten, I mean we had time to eat a little down there, and then we took a little food up with us. But we could not take very much with us and what we found in those houses was very little. The people who lived there, they had very little for themselves. So night came again and we went down again, Sam and I, and crawled our way forward, through houses, other houses. And then we went on all fours around the fence and tried to find a hole that we could possibly use to escape, because we did not know how we were going to get out of there. But we did not find anything. Everything was closed off, with steel wire and barbed wire, the whole fence. So we went as far as we could and then we fetched food again for the other man. We lay still up there in the day time and only went down at night. Then on the third day, we lay there three days, you see, on the third day, in the afternoon, we saw ... *we heard sounds*. We heard a horse-drawn wagon come in. They were sent to fetch something from this camp, I mean some things and whatnot, because they were moving everything over to the ghetto, you see, to the other place. So we looked down and I saw that the two people with the wagon who were loading things were Jews. So we ran down to the wagon, he and I ... Sam and I. I don't remember if the older man was with us. We hid under ... I think he was there, too ... and we hid under all those things they had piled on the wagon and they drove out of the camp. They were stopped by guards but they just looked around on the outside. We heard them speaking German, you see, and they just looked but they weren't so careful about checking the wagon, so we got out of there and could get to the ghetto, or the other camp. After we got there, we had to hide the whole time until that whole ghetto had been eliminated¹.

SAM, THE OLDER BOY, GIVES HIS ACCOUNT

And ... I must have been 12 years old, I suppose. A rumor got started in the camp that we were going to be moved, because the adults had seen them building barracks with barbed wire by the factories. Here, we were still living in proper houses. And one day, we had to line up in that place there. This camp was built around this place, you see. And

¹ Z., 1997, Interview by The Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Lund, Sweden, 16 April, tape 2, 13:03:12–25:02:00.

then we lined up there and an SS-guard came and grabbed me by the nape of the neck and dragged me to a house and threw me in there. And over 100 children had been gathered there. Those children whose parents had a function – out in every camp there were lots of capos. Their children, ten children more-or-less got to stay with their parents. There were over 100 children gathered in that house ... (silence). I went up to the guards and said, "I want to go back to my parents". I got my ears boxed and maybe that woke me up. In any case I had a feeling that something that was not good was going on. There was a second storey so I went up there. There, I found a friend of mine named Noa and he asked me what I was doing. I said, "I am going to hide", and he said that he was, too. And there was another child, *a boy who was six or seven years old* whose name was Matthias. We were ... I must have been around twelve and Noa eleven, or I don't know, something like that, maybe ten. And the other children were screaming or sitting there in apathy, so I just climbed up, went up to the other floor. And there we saw an opening to an attic. The ceiling was very low, and from the stairs, there was one of those wooden railings. So we got up on the railings and Matthias helped Noa pull himself up. Then he took Matthias up again and the two of them pulled me up into the attic. And then we saw that the roof stuck out, like you know, a dormer, with a window with a little roof of its own on top of it. We saw that there was a little hole which we could climb into and get under that little roof. So we climbed in there and it was so little that I lay beside Noa and Matthias, laying on our backs. We lay there and we did not see anything but *we heard*. We heard when the adults marched away and after some time, we heard the trucks come and fetch the children. I say trucks, we found that out later. I heard car motors, *I hear children screaming and it gets quiet in the camp*. Through Christian Poles who lived near the burial place, we later learned that the children were driven out directly and shot down into freshly dug graves. Well, that way we knew that we had lost many other friends. We lay there the whole day and we wondered, could we go on lying there, because the camp was completely empty but there were blankets and things left and there were guards around who were keeping watch. But we knew that at a certain place, where the train tracks ran, there was a hole. Children know things. There was a hole in the fence so we decided to try to go out at night, to try to sneak out and try to find the

factories where our parents worked. So we went down at night and tried to sneak in that direction. And it was really hard because they had searchlights sweeping over the camp so we had to inch along out under the windows. We waited until the searchlights swept by and then we crept to the next window and sat and waited. And finally we came to a place where there were ruins left by a house. We went in and found what was left of three rooms and there was a wall with an opening where a window had been. It was dark in there and if we looked out it was light. And when we were about in the middle of the other room, a guard came along and stood in the window opening with his back toward us. It was a wonder that we did not have a heart attack. We all said that (reaches for air). But Noa pressed his hand over that little boy's mouth so that he could see that something ... and I remember that I tried to stop my heart because it pounded so hard that the guard must be hearing it. Yes, he stood there maybe two, three minutes but *all three of us aged by about 20–30 years in that short time* because that's how long it seemed to us before he went away again. We saw that we could not get out any other way than to crawl all the way back up to the attic. And we lay there for about four days and nights and on the fourth or fifth day, I don't remember exactly, we heard voices on the stairs speaking Yiddish. It was a work group who had been sent to clean up and take blankets to the new camp. So we peeped out from that opening in the attic and we saw three of our people and no guard beside them. So we made ourselves known. They looked up and they turned pale because they thought they were seeing ghosts. In any case, news travelled on the jungle telegraph that children had been found alive, so that they had ... Everyone was, you know, taken to Auschwitz and the ones who had a watch or a ring, they gathered them all together and buried them as far away as they could from that house at that place. They said to the guards that they had found a buried treasure. They went there and then they took us down from the attic and laid us in the wagons with lots of blankets over us and in that way we were taken to the new camp. And they would not allow me to see my parents right away because my parents after all had believed for several days that I was dead and had recited the Kaddish for me, you know, the prayer for the dead. And so if I just showed up all of a sudden, I would ... maybe they ... (laughs). But after some hours, I got to see them and it was of course absolutely wonderful².

DISCUSSION

Similarities in the two accounts

Even if the two men do not say the same thing word for word, what they say does convey similar phenomena in connection with the persecutions. What their accounts have in common is the description of persecution and of their vulnerability. They have experienced being violated both physically and psychologically. They were both “lined up” – “children for themselves”. One of them was roughly “grabbed by the nape of the neck” and had his ears boxed. Both note that they were transported or dragged into a house and felt the threat of being separated and taken away from their parents. Both of them “heard” the silence. They also heard sounds. Noa remembers the sound of shots being fired while Sam remembers motor sounds and children’s screams. Both of them mention a guard by whom they felt threatened.

As children, the two men had a preparedness to act together as friends. They state that they saw each other and that Noa was the one who initiated the contact and brought up the idea of hiding. They describe themselves as agile and they seem to have been able to orient themselves spatially. They understood what was high up and far down, as well as the nature of holes and openings in, e.g., the attic area. They helped to “pull” each other up. They squeezed their bodies together and made themselves small and supple. They stayed in the attic for 3–4 days. Both speak of holes in the fence that enclosed the area, of Jews loading things, and of blankets when they made their escape, hidden in wagons.

They remember their respective ages when this event took place. Sam adds something significant, that he experienced that “children know things”, which in this connection assisted him in creating space, in thinking about a route of escape. Children who are subjected to massive trauma seem to have a distorted conception of age. Sam experienced that he himself aged quickly, “all three of us aged by about 20–30 years”. It is probable that children both see things which adults do not see and see things which adults do not know that children see. In addition, the children were forced by the situation to see things that children should not have to see, and they became precocious and

adult-like, which can have led to their experiences of age distortion. Age distortion seems to have taken place with regard to the conception of the third person’s age. Was he a little child or an older man? Age distortion may be a useful concept in connection with child survivors’ experience of massive trauma and of the compression of time.

Differences in the accounts

The interview sequences give a picture of the same course of events with relatively similar affects, though, at the same time, there are differences. Sam remembers the crying of the other children that were deported while Noa remembers the silence that followed. Noa said that “they looked for something to eat”. This is not mentioned by Sam.

Noa remembers it as if the third person were an older man and Sam remembers it as if the third person were a little boy of 6–7 years of age. I can only speculate as to why the accounts differ in the particular case of the third person. A third person was there, but the awarenesses of this third person are different. To make the third person older as Noa did could be rooted in his memory of longing for a safety-creating person, while at the same time, this older adult was injured, “thrown out”. Noa does not mention missing his parents in this connection whereas Sam does. Sam, who was older, had possibly had more time to stabilize links to an inner object.

Both boys experienced that a guard suddenly appeared. Both seem to remember this event, so it is very probable that it did in fact take place, even if Noa remembers it as taking place in the attic while Sam remembers it as taking place beside the window on the ground level. Noa, the younger, gives the impression of speaking from a “child’s perspective”. It is as if he is being invaded by affects during the time that he is recounting what happened. Sam, the older, by interweaving information which he received later about the course of events in Kielce, seems to be able to maintain more of a distance to the trauma. Affects seem to be more restrained in connection with this particular interview sequence.

Perhaps the boys’ respective ages at the time of the trauma have significance for their ways of remembering, as do their respective degrees of capacity to put their experiences into words, then as well as later. Because of his age, Sam possibly had a greater sense of geographical orientation, whereas Noa, with his nearness to affects, remem-

² Z., 1996, Interview by The Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Malmö, Sweden, 15 December, tape 1, 19:49:07–27:33:20.

bers other details in the sequence of events. Noa says that he “hides” in a house, while Sam mentions going upstairs in a house. The said phenomena illustrate the complexity of the survivors’ life histories.

Psychoanalytical listening

A central task of psychoanalytical listening is to gain an understanding of the narrator’s *experiences*, i.e., the psychic reality which emerges in the manifest memory. It is possible that a historian would pay close attention to differences in the content as a factor to be taken into consideration, perhaps as a bias, which calls for additional material from other sources. The approach of the psychoanalyst is to try to find clues which increase the understanding, in this case concerning, e.g., “the third person”, by using the information which is available in other parts of the life histories. Generally speaking, a trained interviewer and listener to the recorded interviews, by giving special attention to certain themes, to contradictions or apparently irrelevant material, can find surprising information of both historical and psychological value.

My starting point is that Noa and Sam are two completely different individuals of different ages and with different world views rooted in each of their own personal histories. However, in spite of this, they spontaneously recounted several situations from the war in similar ways. Besides the mentioned situation concerning the hiding place in the attic, in which they both were present, there are two similar situations mentioned in which they were apart from each other. One of these occasions concerned being forced to see people they knew in the ghetto being hanged. Both of their accounts of this painful situation were accompanied by strong affects when they were being recalled. The other situation had to do with avoiding a routine procedure in Auschwitz, to which each of them was transported without knowing of the other’s fate. They both managed to get out of having to walk under a cross-bar which would have revealed their short height and young age. There is obviously congruency in other memories as well.

To return to the third person whom they remember in completely different ways, Noa speaks of an older, injured man who had been “thrown out”, whereas Sam speaks of a boy of 6–7 years of age whom he also calls by name. They see the same thing but obviously interpret it in different ways. In later parts of the accounts, I find out that

on his first day in Auschwitz, Noa was placed in a barrack together with other children and people who were old and ill, probably awaiting further transport to the gas chambers. In the morning he discovered “*an older man* who lay to the side of me and ... was dead”, he said. Later Noa was able to escape miraculously from the barrack through a roof window with the help of some older boys. The account of this flight, which in certain respects resembles the sequence of events in the attic in the ghetto (escape up towards the roof), can give clues leading to a hypothesis concerning a shifting and condensing of various memory pictures. The dying man beside Noa in Auschwitz seems to “melt together with” (become condensed with) and be shifted to “the third person” in the attic, whereupon the third person becomes old instead of being a child. In Sam’s later life history, there is no corresponding memory of a boy which could have provided the substance for remembering “the third person” as a little boy. The two men’s memory pictures from the “third person” can thus have to do with how the memory is constructed based on each individual’s personal experiences during and after this trauma and on the degree to which each of them has verbalized what happened. It can be assumed that the incident with the “third person” made different “imprints” in their personalities, both when it occurred in the past and when they remember it now.

Reconstruction and construction of memories

Historical truth and narrative truth are established concepts today in research in the social sciences. In psychoanalysis, there is a parallel conceptual formation designated as reconstruction and construction of memories (Reeder, 1996) or as repeating and retranscribing of experiences (Modell, 1990). When the interviewee has shown strong affects, it is probable that the affects were also present on the historical occasion, which has been pointed out by both cognitive memory research (see above) and experiences from work in psychoanalytical practice, “[If] construction seeks to join various elements in order to form a whole, it is because it always has a historical slant” (Etchegoyen, 1991, p. 348). However, the question is posed as to whether the affects are always related to the same event that the person experienced when he or she shows them during the recounting process. Matthis (2000) makes a comparison with dreaming. According to Matthis, it is not certain that the affect is connected with the history that the

person is recounting, but is connected with something, something is awakening the affect, but exactly what it is which awakens a violent affect, is impossible to know. Matthis stresses that in order to understand the affect, one creates a picture of reality or a dream picture which can explain, e.g., “why I am so afraid”. Something has happened, symbolically or literally. This representation of it is something which can both be partly reconstructed and usually is constructed to a great degree. Against the background of Freud’s trauma theory, she formulates a differentiation between reconstruction and construction: “Reconstruction can take place on the basis of repressed memories, i.e., the memories were conscious at one time, while construction is built upon vague evidence, like a new building established with ‘rubbish’” (p. 224). The patients’ histories are thus always true on one level, but whether they reveal a factual historical truth cannot always be ascertained solely on the basis of what the patients consciously relate. Theoretically, it seems easy to keep reconstruction and construction separate, but in practice, it seems that difficulties are inevitable. Both elements are present all the time. The one never excludes the other. Spence (1982) stresses that there is no clear line where reconstruction stops and construction begins. He says “language is always getting in the way between what the patient saw or felt and the way this experience appears in the analytic conversation” (p. 286).

It is hardly a coincidence that certain words appear in both life histories, e.g., in connection to sounds and silence. With reference to Damasio (1994), who has studied autobiographical memories, Matthis (2000) points out that “when we are subjected to certain stress, the cortex of the suprarenal gland starts to produce glucocorticoids and this contributes to enhancing our memory of significant events. However, when we are subjected to excessive stress – which ... in war situations – the release of glucocorticoids by the cortex of the suprarenal gland increases to such a level that the hippocampus, instead of being stimulated, becomes inhibited; yes, it can even close down completely. Experiences a person goes through in such circumstances leave only *vague traces*, perhaps only in the form of excitement and uneasiness, but the link to a specific place and a specific time is lost” (p. 224). Memories of strong anxiety can only be constructed, never reconstructed. Findings from the work with life histories show that perceptions from traumatic events have, as mentioned,

“made imprints” to such a high degree that they are kept “active” in a part of the self as invading affects.

Reeder (1996) states that a “construction may fill the gap in the historical accounts of the analysands [here, the interviewees] about themselves, when there is no longer any memory to latch onto – in other words, construction intervenes entirely on the narrative level and serves the purpose of achieving coherence in the self-understanding of the analysand” (p. 243), which can be compared to the interviewee’s endeavors to create meaning in his or her own life history. There are examples of discussions between historians and psychoanalysts concerning assessment of life histories. Felman & Laub (1992) describe an example in which historians could not give credibility to a testimony concerning the blowing up of chimneys, because the survivor remembered fewer chimneys than were actually present where the event took place. The psychoanalysts’ understanding was that the survivor was giving testimony about something else, something radical and urgent: that one chimney in Auschwitz was blown up was just as unbelievable as four being blown up. The number played less of a role than the fact that the event actually took place. The survivor bore witness to an event which crushed all thoughts – Jewish resistance just could not happen here. She gave testimony to the breaking of a frame, which can be seen as the historical truth. In summary, it is necessary to keep an open mind as to how the situation actually was in reality (at the time of the historical event). However, we can make observations, reflections and formulate hypotheses based on life histories from experiences of massive trauma, such as these presented by Noa and Sam.

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Suzanne Kaplan
 Norrbackagatan 22
 S-113 41 Stockholm
 Sweden
 e-mail: kaplanbohm@swipnet.se

