Chapter 12

Sharing Divided Times: Responses to the Uses of the Holocaust in the Works of Jean Améry and Ruth Klüger

Yasemin Yildiz

I. Introduction

The larger issues that I am interested in circle around the question of the relationship between the Holocaust and the postwar world. What is the relationship between the event and its aftermath? What, more specifically, is the relationship between the survivors and their postwar contemporaries? As time has elapsed since the event itself, the question has also become: what is the relationship of those who experienced it to later generations? Since the experience of the Holocaust is so extreme, it has been said that there is an unbridgeable gap between those who did experience it and those who did not. Yet, the survivors did live on and many have related their experiences in oral and written testimonies. That, finally, raises another question: what is our relationship as readers of testimonies to survivors and their memories?

My paper is entitled “Sharing Divided Times,” a translation of my German title Getaile Zeiten. In German the words “to share” and “to divide” are the same: teilen. Thus, there is an ambiguity between a shared time and a divided time. This notion of a time both shared and divided allows, I hope, for a differentiated and complex understanding of the contemporaneity of those affected by the Holocaust directly and those affected indirectly. Such a time implicates and makes demands on all of us.

Jean Améry and Ruth Klüger, two survivors of Auschwitz and other camps, have written testimonies that in different ways interrogate the
nature of this “unbridgeable gap” by pointing to its re-production by the postwar world. Améry’s and Klüger’s works transgress the genre of the testimony and expand it. Their testimonies are not linear narratives of their experiences during the Holocaust but include the experience of the postwar world. They tell their Holocaust experiences through the mediation of their reflections on the postwar world’s handling of the Shoah. Thus, they simultaneously testify to their Holocaust and post-Holocaust experiences and are interventions into the postwar world and its self-conception.

Furthermore, Jean Améry’s and Ruth Klüger’s works are rare examples of testimonies by Holocaust survivors who specifically address a German audience. Insofar as addressing someone produces a relationship between addressee and addressee, I take this as a starting point to investigate “German-Jewish relationships” after the Holocaust. Looking at the kinds of addresses that are employed, I analyze the kinds of dialogues with Germans that they imply. Tracing these figures of relationship between survivors and their audiences as they arise out of the testimonies, I argue that both Klüger and Améry point simultaneously to multiple commonalities and differences within these relationships, as my title “sharing divided times” tries to indicate. While the specificity of the address to Germans by these native Austrians should be retained, my consideration of this aspect does not preclude implications for non-German readers.

One important concept which has been influential in the understanding of German-Jewish relations is that of “negative symbiosis,” developed by the historian Dan Diner in the late 1980s. Since 1945 there has been an ongoing debate about whether there ever was a successful “German-Jewish (cultural) symbiosis” before the Nazis destroyed such a possibility altogether. Diner is among those who doubt it. But he argues that Auschwitz has become an unavoidable reference point for German identity as well as Jewish identity and thus has produced inadvertently a negative symbiosis. He writes:

For both Jews and Germans, whether they like it or not, the aftermath of mass murder has been the starting point for self-understanding — a kind of communalities of opposites. For generations to come, this negative symbiosis, created by the Nazis, will color the relationship between the two groups. (NS, p. 291)

The concept of “negative symbiosis” has proven a very helpful way to grasp the complicated relationship of Germans and Jews (that is German and non-German Jews). Nevertheless, I think that the biologically inspired term “symbiosis” is too strong for a mere “communality.” The relationship is also represented too symmetrically for what in reality is an extremely asymmetrical condition. The positions of victims and perpetrators might be opposite of each other, but they are not balanced by each other in such a way as to be symmetrical.

What, then, does it mean to address a German audience, when address produces a common ground between the victims and the people who victimized them?

II. Améry

After returning from the camps and settling in Belgium, Jean Améry chose to continue to write in the German language but refused to write for a German market and a German audience for almost twenty years. “At the Mind’s Limits” thus marks a caesura in his writing, both in terms of the content and method, as well as in its targeted audience. Primo Levi, for example, refused to even write a preface for the German audience, as he explains in “Letters from Germans.” Of course, there is a fundamental difference: In contrast to Levi, Améry and Klüger were born into the German language; as native Austrians, they are writing from within “Germanness.”

As Améry’s peculiar form of address, I would like to turn to his “resentment.” Améry’s resentment is directed primarily against Germans. It is aimed at them, or to put it differently, it is addressed to them. Thus, I read resentment in this context as a form of “address.” Resentment is Améry’s “retrospective grudge” (A, p. 63) against postwar Germany. But it is not merely an expression of his ill feelings towards Germans and the rest of the world that allows the latter to “overcome” and forget the past. His resentment is a result of postwar failures and developments, not a natural outcome of his experiences. Thus, it is a socially produced ‘personal feeling.’

For Améry, his resentments are a tool to nail the perpetrators to their crimes, not let them get away with it, just as “[I]t nails every one of us [that is, Nazi victims] onto the cross of his ruined past” (A, p. 68). As addressed to Germans in general, not just the perpetrators, his resentment is also his attempt to nail the collective of Germans to their past. Améry’s
insistence on his status as victim, rather than survivor, further implicates the victimizers. It also indicates that he has not left that state behind through triumphant survival. He remains a victim and thereby stresses the continuity of his condition, instead of talking about a past that has been overcome. But Améry considers himself by no means a passive victim. Rather, he criticizes the postwar world’s view of victims. He challenges particularly the psychological discourse on the Holocaust:

... after observing us victims, objective scientific method, in its lovely detachment, has already come up with the concept of the “concentration camp syndrome.” I read in a recently published book about “Delayed Psychic Effects After Political Persecution” that all of us are not only physically but also mentally damaged. The character traits that make up our personality are distorted. Nervous restlessness, hostile withdrawal into one’s own self are typical signs of our sickness. It is said that we are “warped.” That causes me to recall fleetingly the way my arms were twisted behind my back when they tortured me. (A, p. 68)

In this passage, Améry introduces himself as a critical reader of literature on Holocaust-related issues. Confronting a psychological approach that declares him to be pathological, he uses irony to undermine “objective science” from his subjective position. He grounds this critique in the experience of his body by drawing a parallel between the twisting of his arms by Nazi torturers and the declaration of his twisted mind by the postwar world’s understanding. However, he does not collapse these two kinds of twisting: the actual material twisting of his arms and the representation of his mind as “warped” are certainly not the same. Instead, he points to the sphere of representation in the postwar world as inflicting new and additional wounds. Questioning its twisted representation of Holocaust survivors, Améry exposes the inadequate, even tainted state of postwar science that has not drawn any lessons from the Shoah. Epistemological tools like scientific objectivity have proven insufficient and suspect after the Shoah. Améry’s critique discloses the necessity for the postwar world to question itself. It also emphasizes the role of representation in the process of facing the Holocaust.

Améry accepts his status as victim, but only to assert that his “warped state” is “a form of the human condition that is morally as well as historically of a higher order than that of healthy straightness” (A, p. 68). By privileging his position, he not only questions the value of “straightness” after Auschwitz but contends that “straightness” itself is perverted by the Shoah. That is, the implications of this event touch everything and “twist” it. Consequently, the “non-victims,” as Améry calls them, are affected by the Holocaust as well.

III. Klüger

Ruth Klüger is a child survivor of Theresienstadt und Auschwitz who published her memoir Weiter leben. Eine Jugend [Living On. A Youth] in 1992 in German. After the war she came to the United States where she became a professor of German. Her memoir was her first non-scholarly book though she also published poetry about her experiences in various places. The memoir was a bestseller in Germany and very well received.

Klüger dedicates her memoir to her “Göttingen friends” and labels it “a German book.” Throughout the book she addresses her readers directly, asks them questions, responds to anticipated questions and entices them through her conversational tone into a dialogue. Although at one point she asks herself urgently and doubtfully, “for whom am I really writing this?” she asserts, “I write it for Germans” (w, p. 142). Thus, her book is a highly self-conscious textual staging of “German-Jewish dialogue.” Her emphasis is less on resentment against Germans than on the problems and pitfalls of this peculiar dialogue.

The ground on which this dialogue has to be built is characterized in her narrative through a situation at the end of the war which I read as emblematic. For the Viennese child, the soldiers annexing Austria are the first Germans she sees. Only at the end of the war and after her escape from a death march to Bergen-Belsen at age 13 does she encounter civilian Germans who are not aware of her identity. Hiding under fake identities, she, her mother and her foster sister are traveling on a train among German refugees, mostly other women with children, from the east into Bavaria. In the midst of this crowded train, a German woman approaches them and covers Klüger with a blanket. This selfless gesture of affection remains ambiguous for the child who asks herself:

But does she mean me? She thinks that I belong and covers me because she believes I am a German child. No, she covers me because I lay here, three-dimensional, I and no one else (w, p. 182).
Would the woman have performed this caring act, if she knew that the child was Jewish? How is Klüger supposed to read the German woman’s reading of her? How is she to evaluate this act and respond to it? Struggling with this dilemma, Klüger is the one who is affected by the implications (e.g. the woman’s potential antisemitism). She has to carry the burden and uncertainty of this situation and therefore experiences it very differently. For the German woman, no visible moral dilemma arises. She is not aware of the way Auschwitz already contaminates even gestures of kindness. Thus, this encounter is marked by ambivalence and asymmetry. When Klüger concludes, “in such a way I arrived among Germans” [“So kam ich unter die Deutschen”] (ibid.), she indicates that this asymmetric ambivalence characterizes her entry into the German environment. Being among Germans therefore provokes ongoing questions about the way she reads and is read by them.

Klüger tells this to her German audience, thereby complicating the levels of reading and interpretation. She cannot erase the asymmetry between herself and them but she can share the dilemma with them. Through her address, she positions her readers opposite of herself, that is, they are not supposed to identify with her but rather identify as her German interlocutors. Thus, her direct address produces a communality but also the difference between their positions. It also distinguishes the present, where such an address is possible, from the past, where, as in the example of the woman on the train, it wasn’t. Sharing this divisive moment in her writing, her address creates a complex form of negative symbiosis.

While she engages with the readers and attempts to bridge the gap produced by the Holocaust, she retains the differences in their positions. She uses her address to challenge the leveling of all camps and all experiences. She argues:

The horrible, too, needs close scrutiny. Behind the barbed wire curtain not everyone is the same, one camp is not like the other. In reality, even this reality was different for everyone (w, p. 83)

Klüger’s charge is directed against the simplified understanding developed in the postwar world:

I insist on these differentiations, risk knowingly, albeit unwillingly to irritate the reader … believing that it is for a good cause; namely to break through the curtain of barbed wire which the postwar world put in front of the camps. There is a separation between then and now, us and them, which does not serve the truth but laziness (w, p. 82).

If the Nazis put her and others into the camps, it is the postwar world that tries to keep survivors’ experiences behind a “curtain of barbed wire,” so that it will not have to face them in their full implications.

Klüger insists on not being reduced to her Holocaust experiences by claiming her history before the deportation: “… whatever you might think, I don’t come from Auschwitz, I am from Vienna” (w, p. 139). This reassertion of her identity is directed against the post-Holocaust world that constructs her only or primarily as an Auschwitz survivor. She contests the place that the postwar world allots to her:

We [survivors] do not form a community with those who died there; it simply is not true, if you count us together with them and yourselves escape to the other bank of this black river, even though it is true that we, as opposed to you, throughout our lifetime reenact something that we carry with us from that place…. In spite of that, I am on the other side of the river, together with you, in our common postwar world… (w, p. 141).

With this image of the “black river,” she counters the rhetoric of unbridgeable gap that mainly serves to set her totally apart from her contemporaries. By locating herself on the same side of the river with them, she affirms her place and demands that her experiences not be used against her and that the “curtain of barbed wire” be lifted.

IV. Conclusion: Sharing Divided Times

Jean Améry’s and Ruth Klüger’s testimonies challenge the postwar world’s understanding of and relation to the Holocaust. Writing in different historical moments (after the Auschwitz trials and after the fall of the Berlin wall, respectively), they point to the long-term effects of the event and the ways the aftereffects have influenced the survivors’/victims’ “living on.” Finally, both attest to their own active presence in the postwar world and thus resist a reduction to testimonial raw material.
Endnotes


4. The question of Austria is one that is buried in both texts. Neither of them addresses Austrians. Austria remains an un-addressable limit.

5. This is the title of an essay in At the Mind’s Limits. Originally, Améry intended to call the volume itself “Resentments,” which indicates the centrality of this figure in his writing.

Chapter 13

In the Vacuum of the World: 
The Shift from Jewish Time to 
Nazi Time and to Timelessness

Hanoch Guy

One of the fundamental personal freedoms is the freedom to use personal and religious time and space. It is the freedom to live one’s religious calendar, celebrate holidays and enjoy personal time with one’s family and friends. All these freedoms were taken away from the victims of the Holocaust. The objective of this article is to describe the process that led to the breakdown of Jewish time cycles and spaces as depicted in the literature of the Holocaust by Yiddish and Hebrew authors. The article will illustrate how the primary time and space of Jewish cycles are replaced by a timeless entity filled with horror, despair, loss of sensual perception and will demonstrate the qualities of the entity that evolved after the collapse of Jewish time.

I do not wish to imply that all the inmates of the concentration camps underwent these experiences. The millions that went through the Holocaust had varied experiences. Complex as human beings are, what happened to millions in the Holocaust is much more complex and incomprehensible. This article’s scope is limited and cannot deal with all the complexity, all the incomprehensibility.

Jewish Time and Its Collapse

Since the exile to Babylonia, Jews have lived in the diaspora in the proud Jewish cycle that was prescribed in God’s covenant with Abraham and the promise after the binding of Isaac: “I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand.”1 This promise was