I would like to propose some reflections on the relation of witnessing to truth, in reference to the historical experience of the Holocaust. For a long time now, and from a variety of perspectives, I have been concretely involved in the quest of testifying and of witnessing—and have come to conceive of the process of the testimony as, essentially, a ceaseless struggle, which I would like here to attempt to sketch out.¹

I

MY POSITION AS A WITNESS

I recognize three separate, distinct levels of witnessing in relation to the Holocaust experience: the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.

The first level, that of being a witness to oneself, proceeds from my autobiographical awareness as a child survivor. I have distinct memories of my deportation, arrival in the camp, and the subsequent life my family and I led there. I remember both these events and the feelings and thoughts they provoked in minute detail. They are not facts that were gleaned from somebody else’s telling me about them. The explicit details (including names of places and people), which I so vividly remember, are a constant source of amazement to my mother in their accuracy and general comprehension of all that was happening.
But these are the memories of an adult. Curiously enough, the events are remembered and seem to have been experienced in a way that was far beyond the normal capacity for recall in a young child of my age. It is as though this process of witnessing was of an event that happened on another level, and was not part of the mainstream of the conscious life of a little boy. Rather, these memories are like discrete islands of precocious thinking, and feel almost like the remembrances of another child, removed, yet connected to me in a complex way.

This essay is based in part on this enigma of one child's memory of trauma. The remembrances of yet another child survivor, known to me quite intimately (from having been his later interviewer and friend) and therefore subtly related to my own in the quality of their precociousness, will serve as a connecting, reemerging thread in the latter part of the essay.

The second level of my involvement in the process of witnessing is my participation, not in the events, but in the account given of them, in my role as the interviewer of survivors who give testimony to the Video Archive—that is, as the immediate receiver of these testimonies. My function in this setting has been that of a companion on the eerie journey of the testimony. As an interviewer, I am present as someone who actually participates in the reliving and reexperiencing of the event. I also become part of the struggle to go beyond the event and not be submerged and lost in it.

The third level is one in which the process of witnessing is itself being witnessed. I observe how the narrator and myself as listener alternate between moving closer and then retreating from the experience—with the sense that there is a truth that we are both trying to reach, and this sense serves as a beacon we both try to follow. The traumatic experience has normally long been submerged and has become distorted in its submersion. The horror of the historical experience is maintained in the testimony only as an elusive memory, and speech. The pressure thus continues unremittingly, and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues. The above-mentioned survivor, for example, constructed her life in such a fated way, that it came to be a testimony to her loneliness and bereavement, in spite of the fact that her world was filled with living people and in spite of her remarkable gifts—her creativity, her warmth, her generosity, her eloquence, and her love of life.

Hers was a life in which the new family she created, the children she bore, had to give continuance and meaning, perhaps provide healing and restitution, to the so suddenly and brutally broken family of her childhood—parents, brothers, and children, several of whom died while she was holding them in her arms. In her present life, she relentlessly holds on to, and searches for, what is familiar to her from her past, with only a dim awareness of what she is doing. Her own children she experiences with deep disappointment as unempathic strangers because of the "otherness" she senses in them, because of their refusal to substitute for, and completely fit into, the world of parents, brothers, and children that was so abruptly destroyed.

Yet hers is a story that could never be told in the way she chose to tell it, that is, by structuring her whole life as a substitute for the mourned past, because there could not be an audience (even in her family) that was generous, sensitive, and self-effacing enough to obliterate its own existence and be nothing but the substitutive actors of her unexplicated memory. Her specific attempt to tell her story by the very conduct of her life led to an
unavoidable dead end, in which the fight against the obliteration of the story could only be won at the cost of the obliteration of the audience.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TELLING

In this case as in many others, the imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhibited by the impossibility of telling, and therefore, silence about the truth commonly prevails. Many of the survivors interviewed at the Fortunoff Video Archive realize that they have only begun the long process of witnessing now—forty years after the event. Some have hardly spoken of it, but even those who have talked incessantly, feel that they managed to say very little that was heard. None find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent. Moreover, survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory, that is, of a forcibly imposed “external evil,” which causes an endless struggle with and over a delusion. The “not telling” of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events.

This power of distortion in present-day life is demonstrated by the loss of a sense of human relatedness experienced by one woman survivor I interviewed. She described herself as “someone who had never known feelings of love.” This feeling of lack encompassed all the people in her life. Her family, including her children, were never able to thaw her heart, or penetrate the bars of her “self-imprisonment.” Because of this self-inflicted emotional imprisonment she found herself surrounded by hatred and disdain for and from all those closest to her. Ironically, throughout those years she spent all her free time, and still does, caring for the terminally sick and the old. But these anguished people she cares for, make her feel precisely that she cannot love them enough.

As a teenager during the war, she had lost most of her family and witnessed many awesome events. Among them was the choking to death of a small baby who had cried too loudly, as well as the burning alive of several of her close relatives. These relatives had been put into a boarded-up wooden shack that was set afire. Toward the end of the war, she participated as a partisan in the hunting down and killing of local collaborators. During this period, her fellow partisans captured and turned over a seventeen-year-old German youth to her. She was given free hand to take revenge. After all that she had witnessed and lived through, this woman bandaged the German’s wounds and turned him over to the POW group. When asked why she had done this, she replied: “How could I kill him—he looked into my face and I looked into his.”

Had she been fully able to grasp the truth about herself, and not perceived herself as someone “with a heart of stone” but as a compassionate, loving person, she might have lived her life differently. Her previous inability to tell her story had marred her perception of herself. The untold events had become so distorted in her unconscious memory as to make her believe that she herself, and not the perpetrator, was responsible for the atrocities she witnessed. If she could not stop them, rescue or comfort the victims, she bore the responsibility for their pain. In other words, in her memory of her Holocaust experience, as well as in the distorted way in which her present life proceeded from this memory, she failed to be an authentic witness to herself. This collapse of witnessing is precisely, in my view, what is central to the Holocaust experience.

AN EVENT WITHOUT A WITNESS

On the basis of the many Holocaust testimonies I have listened to, I would like to suggest a certain way of looking at the Holocaust that would reside in the following theoretical perspective: that what precisely made a Holocaust out of the event is the unique way in which, during its historical occurrence, the event produced no witnesses. Not only, in effect did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims.

A witness is a witness to the truth of what happens during an event. During the era of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, the truth of the event could have been recorded in perception and in memory, either from within or from without, by Jews, or any one of a number of “outsiders.” Outsider-witnesses could have been, for instance, the next door neighbor, a friend, a business partner, community institutions including the police and the courts of law, as well as bystanders and potential rescuers and allies from other countries.

Jews from all over the world, especially from Palestine and the United States could have been such possible outside witnesses. Even the executioner, who was totally oblivious to the plea for life, was potentially such an “out-
side” witness. Ultimately, God himself could be the witness. As the event of the Jewish Genocide unfolded, however, most actual or potential witnesses failed one-by-one to occupy their position as a witness, and at a certain point it seemed as if there was no one left to witness what was taking place.

In addition, it was inconceivable that any historical insider could remove herself sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness, that is, to be sufficiently detached from the inside so as to stay entirely outside of the trapping roles, and the consequent identities, either of the victim or of the executioner. No observer could remain untainted, that is, maintain an integrity—a wholeness and a separateness—that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing. The perpetrators, in their attempt to rationalize the unprecedented scope of the destructiveness, brutally imposed upon their victims a delusional ideology whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane, point of reference in the witness.

What I feel is therefore crucial to emphasize is the following: it was not only the reality of the situation and the lack of responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witness: it was also the very circumstance of being inside the event that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed. One might say that there was, thus, historically no witness to the Holocaust, either from outside or from inside the event.

What do I mean by the notion of a witness from inside? To understand it one has to conceive of the world of the Holocaust as a world in which the very imagination of the Other was no longer possible. There was no longer an other to which one could say “Thou” in the hope of being heard, of being recognized as a subject, of being answered (cf. Buber, 1953). The historical reality of the Holocaust became, thus, a reality that extinguished philosophically the very possibility of addressing, the possibility of appealing, or of turning to, another. But when one cannot turn to a “you” one cannot say “thou” even to oneself. The Holocaust created in this way a world in which one could not bear witness to oneself. The Nazi system turned out therefore to be fool proof, not only in the sense that there were in theory no outside witnesses but also in the sense that it convinced its victims, the potential witnesses from the inside, that what was affirmed about their “otherness” and their inhumanity was correct and that their experiences were no longer communicable even to themselves, and therefore, perhaps never took place. This loss of the capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well.

THE SECRET ORDER

Survivors often claim that they experience the feeling of belonging to a “secret order” that is sworn to silence. Because of their “participation” in the Holocaust they have become the “bearers of a secret (Geheimnissträger)” never to be divulged. The implications of this imaginary complicity and of this conviction of their having been chosen for a secret mission are that they believe, out of loyalty, that their persecution and execution by the Nazis was actually warranted. This burdensome secret belief in the Nazi-propagated “truth” of Jewish subhumanity compels them to maintain silence. As “subhumans,” a position they have accepted and assumed as their identity by virtue of their contamination by the “secret order,” they have no right to speak up or protest. Moreover, by never divulging their stories, they feel that the rest of the world will never come to know the real truth, the one that involved the destruction of their humanity. The difficulty that prevents these victims from speaking out about their victimization emphasizes even more the delusional quality of the Holocaust. This delusion, fostered by the Holocaust, is actually lived as an unconscious alternate truth, by executioners, victims and bystanders alike. How can such deadlock be broken?

THE EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES

It is in children’s stories that we often find the wisdom of the old. “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is an example of one such story about the secret sharing of a collective delusion. The emperor, though naked, is duped into believing that he is seated before his audience in his splendid new clothes. The entire audience participates in this delusion by expressing wonderment at his spectacular new suit. There is no one in the audience who dares remove himself from the crowd and become an outcast by pointing out that the new clothes are nonexistent. It takes a young, innocent child, whose eyes are not veiled by conventionality, to declare the emperor naked. In much the same way that the power of this delusion in the story is ubiquitous, the Nazi delusion was ubiquitously effective in Jewish communities as well. This is why those who were lucid enough to warn the Jewish communities about the forthcoming destruction either through information or through
forethought, were dismissed as “prophets of doom” and labeled traitors or madmen. They were discredited because they were not conforming by staying within the confines of the delusion. It is in this way that the capability of a witness alone to stand out from the crowd and not be flooded and engulfed by the event itself, was precluded.

The silence about the Holocaust after the war might have been, in turn, a continuation of the power and the victory of that delusion. As in the story of “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” it has taken a new generation of “innocent children,” removed enough from the experience, to be in a position to ask questions.

III

ACROSS THE GAP

Because the event that had no witness to its truth essentially did not exist, and thus signified its own death, its own reduction to silence, any instance of its survival inevitably implied the presence of some sort of informal discourse, of some degree of unconscious witnessing that could not find its voice or its expression during the event.

And indeed, against all odds, attempts at bearing witness did take place; chroniclers of course existed and the struggle to maintain the process of recording and of salvaging and safeguarding evidence was carried on relentlessly. Diaries were written and buried in the ground so as to be historically preserved, pictures were taken in secret, messengers and escapees tried to inform and to warn the world of what was taking place. However, these attempts to inform oneself and to inform others were doomed to fail. The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially not be met during the actual occurrence. The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event—of its dimensions, consequences, and above all, of its radical otherness to all known frames of reference—that it was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine. There was therefore no concurrent “knowing” or assimilation of the history of the occurrence. The event could thus unimpededly proceed as though there were no witnessing whatsoever, no witnessing that could decisively impact on it.3

The experience of encountering today the abundance of the retrospective testimonies about the Holocaust is thus doubly significant and doubly moving. It is not by chance that these testimonies—even if they were engendered during the event—become receivable only today; it is not by chance that it is only now, belatedly, that the event begins to be historically grasped and seen. I wish to emphasize this historical gap which the event created in the collective witnessing. This emphasis does not invalidate in any way the power and the value of the individual testimonies, but it underscores the fact that these testimonies were not transmittable, and integratable, at the time. It is all the more imperative to recognize and to enhance today the value and the momentous contributions of the testimonies and the witnesses who preserved evidence often by risking their lives. The ultimate historical transmission of the testimonies beyond and through the historical gap, emphasizes the human will to live and the human will to know even in the most radical circumstances designed for its obliteration and destruction.

The perspective I propose tries to highlight, however, what was ultimately missing, not in the courage of the witnesses, not in the depth of their emotional responses, but in the human cognitive capacity to perceive and to assimilate the totality of what was really happening at the time.

WITNESSING AND RESTORATION

Yet it is essential for this narrative that could not be articulated to be told, to be transmitted, to be heard, and hence the importance of endeavors like the Fortunoff Video Archive designed to enable the survivors to bear witness, to enable, that is, the act of bearing witness (which the Holocaust invalidated) to take place, belatedly, as though retroactively.

Such endeavors make up for the survivors’ need for witnesses, as well as for the historical lack of witnessing, by setting the stage for a reliving, a reoccurrence in the presence of a witness. In fact, the listener (or the interviewer) becomes the Holocaust witness before the narrator does.

To a certain extent, the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out. It is the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener, which makes possible something like a repossessing of the act of witnessing. This joint responsibility is the source of the reemerging truth.

The Video Archive might, therefore, be thought of as helping to create, after the fact, the missing Holocaust witness, in opening up the historical conceivability (the retrospective condition of possibility), of the Holocaust witness. The testimony constitutes in this way a conceptual breakthrough, as
well as a historical event in its own right, a historical recovery which I tend to think of as a "historical retroaction."

What ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing, spasmodic and continuous, conscious and unconscious, is not simply the information, the establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of living through testimony, of giving testimony.

The testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal "thou," and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself.

In my experience, repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation. The event must be reclaimed because even if successfully repressed, it nevertheless invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one's life.

IV

THE ICON

To illustrate the importance of the process of witnessing and of giving testimony and the struggle involved in it, I would like to relate the story of a man who is currently a high ranking officer in the Israeli army and whom I interviewed during a sabbatical year he spent at Yale University (Fortunoff, T152).

As a little boy of about four years old, he lived with his parents in the Krakow ghetto. A rumor, which eventually materialized, began spreading that all children were going to be rounded up for extermination. The parents started to make plans to devise ways to save their son by smuggling him out of the ghetto. They would talk about it at night when he should have been asleep, but he overheard them. One night, while the guards were being distracted, they indeed managed to get him out of the gate. His mother wrapped him up in a shawl and gave him a passport photograph of herself as a student. She told him to turn to the picture whenever he felt the need to do so. His parents both promised him that they would come and find him and bring him home after the war. With that, and with an address where to go, he was sent out into the streets. The address was a whorehouse, a marginal institution itself and therefore, more hospitable to the homeless. He was received with open arms. For years he used to speak of the whorehouse as a hospital, with the color white featuring predominantly in his memory, because the first thing he was given on arrival was a white glass of milk, and, in his imagination, the place could not be anything but a helping hospital. Eventually, his hideout became too dangerous and he had to leave. He roamed the streets, joined other gangs of boys, and found refuge in the homes of generous, gentile families who took him in for periods of time. The task of making it from day to day preoccupied him completely and in moments of solitude he would take out his mother's picture and talk to her.

In one of the gentile houses he stayed in (living on the papers of a child that had died), the family was in the habit of praying together every evening. When everybody knelt and prayed to the crucifix, the lady of the house, who may have suspected he was Jewish, was kind enough to allow him to pray to whomever he wished. The young boy would take out the photograph of his mother and pray to it, saying, "Mother, let this war be over and come and take me back as you promised." Mother indeed had promised to come and take him back after the war, and not for a moment did he doubt that promise.

In my interpretation, what this young vagabond was doing with the photograph of his mother was, precisely, creating his first witness, and the creation of that witness was what enabled him to survive his years on the streets of Krakow. This story exemplifies the process whereby survival takes place through the creative act of establishing and maintaining an internal witness, who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life.

This early internal witness in turn played a crucial role not only in his actual physical survival but also in the later adult testimony the child survivor gave to himself and to others by augmenting his ability to create a cohesive, integrated narrative, of the event. This testimony to himself came to be the story of the hidden truth of his life, with which he has to struggle incessantly in order to remain authentic to himself.

A PASSAGE THROUGH DIFFERENCE OR THE BROKEN PROMISE

Knowing one's real truth, however, can also be very costly, as is demonstrated by what happens to the little vagabond boy after liberation. He manages miraculously to find his parents, but when he and his parents are reunited, they are not the people he remembers: they no longer even resemble the image he has carried in his mind for so long. His mother does not look like the person in the photograph. His parents have come back as death
camp survivors, haggard and emaciated, in striped uniforms, with teeth hanging loose in their gums. Their return does not bring back the lost safety of childhood the boy has so ardently prayed for. He finds that he can only have nightmares that will recur all his life. In it he finds himself on a conveyor belt moving relentlessly towards a metal compactor. Nothing he can do will stop that conveyor belt and he will be carried to his end, crushed to death by the machine. Every time he has this dream, he wakes up, totally disoriented and utterly terrified. Because he has lost the life-sustaining internal witness he found in his mother's image, after the war, he becomes, paradoxically enough, a mere "child victim" deprived of the holding presence of a witness. Many of the things he consequently does, as he grows up to be a man, are desperate attempts to subdue the abandoned child victim within himself. As a high-ranking officer in the Israeli army he becomes known for repeated acts of bravery, risking his life, as he rescues wounded soldiers under heavy fire. In speaking about these brave acts, he will later address his daily prayers to God for protection, for the resumption of his lost innocence, for another chance to make the world safe for the little boy as he promised, but he comes back as a disfigured, not identical to-herself—she no longer looks like the mother in the picture. There is no healing reunion with those who are, and which makes the resumption of life, in spite of the failed promise, at all possible. The testimony cannot efface the Holocaust. It cannot deny it. It makes the resumption of an abruptly interrupted innocent childhood. The testimony in its commitment to truth is a passage through, and an exploration of, difference—and which makes the resumption of life, in spite of the failed promise, at all possible. The testimony as a realization of the truth. On the one hand, the process of the testimony does in fact hold out the promise of truth as the return of a sane, normal, and connected world. On the other hand, because of its very commitment to truth, the testimony enforces at least a partial breach, failure and relinquishment of this promise. The mother that comes back not only fails to make the world safe for the little boy as she promised, but she comes back different, disfigured, not identical to herself. She no longer looks like the mother in the picture. There is no healing reunion with those who are, and continue to be, missing, no recapture or restoration of what has been lost, no resumption of an abruptly interrupted innocent childhood. The testimony aspires to recapture the lost truth of that reality, but the realization of the testimony is not the fulfillment of this promise. The testimony in its commitment to truth is a passage through, and an exploration of, difference, rather than an exploration of identity, just as the experience it testifies to—the Holocaust—is unassimilable, because it is a passage through the ultimate difference—the otherness of death.

Yet it is this very commitment to truth, in a dialogic context and with an authentic listener, which allows for a reconciliation with the broken promise, and which makes the resumption of life, in spite of the failed promise, at all possible. The testimony cannot efface the Holocaust. It cannot deny it. It cannot bring back the dead, undo the horror, or reestablish the safety, the
authenticity and the harmony of what was home. But neither does it succumb to death, nostalgia, memorializing, ongoing repetitious embattlements with the past, or flight to superficiality or to the seductive temptation of the illusion of substitutions. It is a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds—the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is—that are different and will always remain so. The testimony is inherently a process of facing loss—of going through the pain of the act of witnessing, and of the ending of the act of witnessing—which entails yet another repetition of the experience of separation and loss. It reenacts the passage through difference in such a way, however, that it allows perhaps a certain repossession of it.

It is the realization that the lost ones are not coming back; the realization that what life is all about is precisely living with an unfulfilled hope; only this time with the sense that you are not alone any longer—that someone can be there as your companion—knowing you, living with you through the unfulfilled hope, someone saying: "I'll be with you in the very process of your losing me. I am your witness."

1. As the cofounder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale; as an interviewer of the survivors who give testimony; as a psychoanalyst who treats Holocaust survivors and their children, and as a child survivor myself.

2. As an example for the core of this delusion, I shall quote the interpretation made by a psychoanalyst to a survivor patient: "Hitler's crime was not only the killing of the Jews, but getting the Jews to believe that they deserved it."

3. Had there been such effective, material witnessing, the event would have had to change its course and the "final solution" could not have been carried out to the extent that it was, in full view of the civilized world.

References

Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University. Founded in 1981.