

Tribhuvan University

Cultural Trauma in Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*

A Dissertation Submitted to the Central Department of English T.U.  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Philosophy in English

By

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June 2014

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Letter of Recommendation

Mukundra Bikram Shah has completed his dissertation entitled "Cultural Trauma in Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*" under my supervision. He carried out his research from September 2013 to April 2014 and completed it successfully. I hereby recommend his dissertation be submitted for the viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

This Dissertation entitled "Cultural Trauma in Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Mukundra Bikram Shah has been approved by the undersigned members of Research Committee.

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## **Acknowledgements**

At first I would like to offer my heartfelt gratitude and indebtedness to my mentor and supervisor Dr. Beerendra Pandey, Professor of Central Department of English, T. U. Kirtipur, for all sorts of guidance and assistance he provided in making my journey in to the inhospitable world of research writing with his ever present and easily approachable expert knowledge, encouraging and positive attitude without which, I am sure, the successful destination of this research project would have become more crucial, if not impossible, task.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Anirudra Thapa, the Coordinator of the M Phil Program, and Central Department of English T.U. Kirtipur for the assistance offered. In the same way, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Amma Raj Joshi, the Head of the Central Department of English, T. U. Kirtipur, who provided me his invaluable help by directing my attention towards appropriate procedures.

Last but not the least, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my parents for their encouragement, support and blessing that gave me the strength of pursue my passion. Similarly, I couldn't help thanking to my friends, Mr. Jitendra Nepali and Khim Raj Gautam for their support and encouragement in completing this project.

June 2014

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## **Abstract**

This research on Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* and Elie Wiesel's *Night* tries to explore cultural trauma as the narrating witness in these two autobiographies recount their traumas of the Holocaust. The major objective is to understand the relationship between cultural trauma and collective identity: how the threat to Jewish cultural identity leads to the forging of cultural trauma in the two memoirs. The study argues that trauma of Levi and Wiesel grounded in the events of the Holocaust, becomes a way of stressing the ethical character of the cultural trauma process. Even though trauma is fundamentally a matter of psychology, it is equally a matter of social construction as the survivors have to live in harmony with socio-cultural and religious surroundings. Even if Levi and Wiesel try to psychologically release themselves of the traumatic experience of the Holocaust, they cannot help making it a cultural trauma.

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## **I. Introduction: Traumatic Experience of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel**

This dissertation seeks to explore the solidifying of cultural trauma in Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* and Elie Wiesel's *Night* as the narrating witness in these two autobiographies recount their traumas of the Holocaust. The central objective is to understand the relationship between cultural trauma and collective identity: how the threat to Jewish cultural identity leads to the forging of cultural trauma in the two texts. The study argues that Levi Wiesel's trauma, grounded in the events of the Holocaust, becomes a way of stressing the ethical character of the cultural trauma process. How these two autobiographical writers expand the circle of the "I" into "We" and still imbibe or withhold the ethical imperative is the major problem under exploration. Even though trauma is fundamentally a matter of psychology, it is equally a matter of social construction. It is assumed that even if Levi and Wiesel try to psychologically evacuate themselves of the traumatic burden of the Holocaust, they end up making it a cultural trauma which occurs in-between the event and its representation through an importation of "thick" ethics rather than "thin" morality.

Levi's *If This Is a Man* is a testimony of his first-hand experiences in Auschwitz. This work provides insight into the lives and nature of the victims of the Holocaust, as well as man's loss of identity as a result of dehumanization at the hand Nazis. In *If This Is a Man*, Levi discusses how he and many others were dehumanized in order to survive. He explains that people live from day to day by stealing food from the sick and healthy people like animals, forgetting their human identity. In his narrative, Levi recounts how he gave up moral and decent standards of living, living in constant fear of being caught, doing something wrong. Levi emphasizes the effect of the mindless slavery inhabited by the Jews in the concentration camps, which causes trauma in their later life. The impact of the Holocaust is so adverse that the

survivors forget the point of life itself almost not caring whether they live or die. They do not have free will or any other type opinions, turned against each other. They tend to consider themselves as humans.

In the same way, Wiesel's numerous encounters with death in *Night* frequently cause him to contemplate the importance of being alive, causing him a loss of belongingness in Jewish community. *Night* represents one individual's horrifying story and follows him through his loss of innocence and journey to manhood. It expresses all of his memories and portrays why devastating times such as these need to be remembered and recognized in order to prevent them from ever taking place again. This is how many of the Jews felt during the times of the Holocaust. In many instances throughout this memoir, Wiesel is forced to question the existence of God and his authority, making the survivors non-human in human society.

Levi's *If This Is a Man* and Elie Wiesel's *Night* have received a host of criticism since their publication as they deal with the direct experience of the Holocaust survivors at the Concentration camp. These two texts form a sampling of a much larger body of literature through which the impact of the Holocaust experience is communicated, recreated, commented upon, condemned, illustrated, and explored. As Gillian M. Mozer notes that each of these works serves as a "demonstration of the Holocaust impact on a different facet of the complex folds of humanity; Wiesel's texts address religious identity, as composed of belief and the societal aspect of religion. Levi's memoir deals with the struggle to preserve intellectual subjectivity" (8). An examination of these authors and texts shows remarkable indestructibility of human identity, as well as its suggestibility in the context of unbelievable trauma.

Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl observed in Levi's *If This Is a Man*, "[The] intensification of inner life help[s] the prisoner finds a refuge from the emptiness,



desolation, and spiritual poverty of his existence” (Frankl 50). He observed that this takes many forms. First and foremost, he urges you to cultivate an imagination that is rich in memories of the best parts of your past, however ordinary or trifling they may seem to others. The family, friends, and teachers who are here today to celebrate with you are the very embodiment of love, a reminder of the best parts of you, and a reassurance that you matter! Hold onto this memory when you are tempted to despair and lose hope. He stated that “as the inner life of the prisoner tend[s] to become more intense, he also experience[s] the beauty of art and nature as never before” (Frankl 50).

In *Night*, the autobiographical account of his Holocaust experience, Wiesel shares the ways in which his experiences at Auschwitz and Buchenwald fractured his religious identification as a Jew. He charts a personal transition which critics Ozsvath and Satz characterize as movement "from a securely religious perception [into] rebellion against God, alternating among questions, accusations, and despairing denials" (Ozsvath and Satz 203). In *The Audacity of Expressing the Inexpressible*, Ozsvath and Satz argue that the religious themes in *Night* "are in fact, the universal issues of the Holocaust: the necessity to understand and absorb incomprehensible evil [and] the confrontation of God's apparent abandonment of His people" (Ozsvath and Satz 204).

Wiesel's suffering at the concentration camp makes lose faith in anything and God for that matter. Alfred Kazin writes:

It is this literal 'death of God' as absolute emptiness in the soul, the blackness that in his mind means that there is no longer any light from a divine source, that Wiesel experienced most in the endless night of Auschwitz. What makes his book unusual and gives it such a particular

poignancy among the many personal accounts of Nazism is that it recounts the loss of his faith by an intensely religious young Jew who grew up in an Orthodox community of Transylvania. (qtd. in Bloom 55)

In fact, in *Wiesel and the Absurd*, Josephine Knopp centers her entire argument around the principle idea that the impossible but true reality of the camps created what she terms the absurd, or "the breakdown of the accustomed order in God's world, the dissolution of a long established relationship between man and God" (Knopp, 214). Thus, as much as reality warps and is turned on its head in the concentration camp, Wiesel's religion is also turned inside out by cruelty and inhumanity around him. Regarding Wiesel's *Night*, Robert J. Willis comments that Wiesel pictures "personal humanity conquering impersonal death" (161). This is how Wiesel witnessed and survived death.

Although different critics have studied *If This Is a Man* and *Night*, they have not yet explored trauma. Hence, this dissertation seeks to study the texts from the perspective of cultural trauma.

This research work seeks to explore cultural trauma as the narrative witness in these two autobiographies recount their traumas of the Holocaust. The main objective of the study is to understand the relationship between cultural trauma and collective identity: how the threat to Jewish cultural identity leads to the forging of cultural trauma in the two memoirs. The study argues that trauma of Levi and Wiesel grounded in the events of the Holocaust, becomes a way of stressing the ethical character of the cultural trauma process. Even though trauma is fundamentally a matter of psychology, it is equally a matter of social construction as the survivors have to live in harmony with socio-cultural and religious surroundings. Even if Levi

and Wiesel try to psychologically release themselves of the traumatic experience of the Holocaust, they cannot help making it a cultural trauma.

The dissertation has been divided into three chapters. The first chapter presents an introductory outline of the work – a short introduction to the research and a short literature review. Moreover, it gives a general outline of the entire work. The second chapter analyzes the text at a considerable length, taking theoretical support from trauma theory, especially cultural trauma. It analyzes how the texts of Wiesel and Levi reflect cultural trauma. Finally, the third or the last chapter sums up the main points of the present research work and the findings of the researcher.

## **II. Holocaust: A Historical Overview**

Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nationalist Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi Party), one of the strongest parties in Germany, became Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its collaborators murdered six million Jews and five million other civilians, including Sinti and Roma people (also known by their derogatory label as Gypsies), Poles, people with physical and mental disabilities, gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents. Even though Jews comprised less than one percent of the total German population in 1933 (600,000), Hitler used anti-Semitism as a political weapon to gain popular support, blaming Jews for all of Germany's problems—their defeat in World War I, economic depression, and the Bolshevik threat of communism. That Hitler's accusations were blatantly contradictory and his facts often fabricated made little difference.

By the early 1930s, many in the Jewish population in the country had resided in Germany for generations and were engaged in all levels of social and professional society. The German Jews felt a strong loyalty and kinship for their German heritage. More than 100,000 German Jews served in the army in World War I and 12,000 died in the line of duty. This strong sense of identity, both as Germans and Jews, made the reality of the early measures against them even more baffling and difficult to accept. However, the long history of anti-Semitism in Europe and Germany allowed Hitler's attacks against the "Jews to take hold among the German citizens. The German people believed his accusations or were at least willing to go along with him" (qtd. in Donat 35).

Once in control, Hitler solidified his position by putting an end to democracy in Germany. He did this by invoking the Enabling Act—emergency decrees of the

German constitution which suspended individual freedoms and gave extraordinary powers to the executive. Hitler began to quickly escalate his campaign of intimidation, terror, and violence. He moved to ostracize Jews in all sectors of German society: economic, political, cultural, and social. The Nazis were able to use the government, the police, the courts, the schools, the newspapers, and radio to implement their racist ideology. This ideology held that Germans were “racially superior” and there was a struggle for survival between their race, the Aryan or “master race,” and other inferior people. While Hitler’s terror was waged against anyone deemed an “enemy of the state,” including communists, trade unionists, and other “radicals,” Jews were marked as the lowest race with extreme vengeance.

Under the banner “The Jews are our misfortune,” between 1933 and 1939 the Nazi State legislated restrictions against Jews designed to force them out of Germany’s economic, political, and social life. All non-Aryans (who had Jewish parents or two or more Jewish grandparents) were expelled from the civil service. In 1933, the government called for a general boycott of all Jewish-owned businesses and passed laws excluding Jews from journalism, radio, farming, teaching, the theater, and films. The next year, Jews were dismissed from the army and excluded from practicing medicine, law and business. However, the Nuremberg Laws passed in 1935 came as the greatest blow. Jews, even German-born Jews, were stripped of their German citizenship. These laws created a climate in which Jews were viewed as inferior or subhuman.

By the late 1930s, Jews were completely separated from non-Jews. They could not eat, drink, go to school, or socialize with German Christians. Jews could no longer own cars, bikes, or pets; the list of legal prohibitions was extensive. To legislate, enforce, and administer his systematic campaign of persecution, Hitler used the local

police, judges, and legislators, the very people entrusted to serve, protect, and administer justice to all people. Alexander Donat writes:

Jews at all times had to carry their identification documents, which were stamped with a capital “J” or the word “Jude” (the German word for Jew). All Jews were forced to use Hebrew middle names—Israel for men and Sarah for women. These names were officially recorded on all birth and marriage certificates. (54)

While Hitler and the Nazi party did not invent the use of propaganda to sway public opinion or build loyalty, the Nazis brought the use of it to new extremes during the years preceding the war. Joseph Goebbels, as the Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, made sure every form of expression in Germany—from textbooks, to music, to art and film—carried the same message of the purity and righteousness of the German Aryan race and the evils and dangers of the Jews. Massive rallies were held to build obedience and loyalty to the Nazi party and national holidays were created to celebrate the Germans’ leader and party. Beginning at the age of six, the Aryan children of Germany enrolled in Nazi youth groups. By 1939, 90% of these children belonged to various groups of the Nazi youth movement. Hitler was quoted as saying that the key to his success was the youth of Germany, and his goal was to create a “violently active, dominating, intrepid and brutal youth.” He succeeded.

At the same time as the Nazis waged their increasingly hateful campaign to get rid of the Jewish presence in Germany, Hitler strengthened and extended his private army of terror. In 1934, the SS (Security Police) was established as Hitler’s elite force. Along with the Gestapo (Special State Police), the SS proceeded to weed out and eliminate any opposition. The SS set up concentration camps throughout

Germany. Without being officially charged, anyone suspected of disloyalty or disobedience would be sent there. Dachau, the first concentration camp, was opened in 1933 to hold such “enemies of the State.”

Hitler reintroduced the military draft in 1935, in violation of the World War I Versailles Treaty. In 1936, German troops marched into the Rhineland and Hitler signed an agreement with Italy’s fascist dictator, Mussolini, to establish the Berlin-Rome Axis. In March 1938, German troops invaded Austria and were met with no resistance. Austria became part of greater Germany in what was known as “The Anschluss” or joining. Hitler next seized the Sudetenland, an area of Czechoslovakia where many Germans lived. He claimed that he was only interested in taking back areas that were already inhabited by Germans. The government leaders of Great Britain and France chose to believe him.

By September 1, 1939, it was abundantly clear that Hitler could not be held at his word. German tanks and bombers entered Poland and within three weeks crushed all organized resistance. On September 3, England and France declared war against Germany, and World War II commenced. For Hitler, the war provided two opportunities to fulfill Germany’s destiny: first, to gain additional territory, living space or “Lebensraum,” for the German people, and second (and equally important), to rid Europe of all of its Jews.

By the time the war broke out, Hitler had already turned Germany into a police state and had long begun its campaign of terror and persecution. As early as 1933, obsessed with obtaining a pure Aryan race, the Nazis began a program designed to “improve the human race through selective breeding” (eugenics). Laws were passed to reduce the number of “inferior” people through a program of forced sterilization, making them incapable of reproduction. The first victims of this program

were people who doctors decided were “mentally deficient.” In 1933, about 500 children of black French soldiers and German women living in the Rhineland were forcibly sterilized. The medical establishment’s approval of this campaign led to the adoption of so-called “euthanasia” or mercy killings. Over 450,000 people were sterilized or killed in special institutions and hospitals before the program was ended.

Trade unionists, political opponents, and others labeled by the Nazis as “enemies of the State” were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Under the 1935 Nazi-revised criminal code, as many as 15,000 gay men were imprisoned in concentration camps. Jehovah’s Witnesses, about 20,000 in Germany, were also vigorously persecuted. Many families were broken up, with adults going to prisons and concentration camps, and their children to juvenile detention homes and orphanages.

Almost half of the German Jewish population between 1933 and 1939 left Germany to escape the increasingly difficult and dangerous circumstances. But many countries, including the United States, were unwilling to take in Jewish refugees. In 1938, twenty-nine countries participated in the Evian Conference to discuss the problem of refugees from Germany. With the exception of the Dominican Republic, no country agreed to raise its quota for immigration.

A new level of state-sponsored violence was initiated against the Jewish community, triggered by the following sequence of events. In 1938, 17,000 Jews of Polish citizenship, many of whom had been living in Germany for decades, were arrested and relocated across the Polish border. The Polish government refused to admit them so they were interned in “relocation camps” on the Polish frontier.

Among the deportees was Zindel Grynszpan, was born in western Poland and had moved to Hanover, Germany, where he established a small store in 1911. On



the night of October 27, 1938, Grynszpan and his family were forced out of their home by German police. His store and the family's possessions were confiscated, and they were forced to move over the Polish border.

Grynszpan's seventeen-year-old son Herschel was living with an uncle in Paris. When he received news of his family's expulsion, he went to the German embassy in Paris on November 7, intending to assassinate the German Ambassador to France. Upon discovering that the Ambassador was not in the embassy, he shot a low-ranking diplomat, Third Secretary Ernst vom Rath. Rath was critically wounded and died two days later on November 9. Grynszpan's attack was interpreted by Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Chief of Propaganda, as a direct attack against the Reich and used it as an excuse to launch a pogrom against Jews. This pogrom has come to be called Kristallnacht, "Night of Broken Glass." On the nights of November 9 and 10, rampaging mobs throughout Germany and the newly acquired territories of Austria and Sudetenland freely attacked Jews in the street, in their homes, and at their places of work and worship. Almost 100 Jews were killed and hundreds more injured; approximately 7,000 Jewish businesses and homes were damaged and looted; 1,400 synagogues were burned; cemeteries and schools were vandalized; and 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

Kristallnacht marked the beginning of the end, the turning point away from a policy bent on forced emigration to one of systematic physical annihilation. The next step was to force Jews from their homes, isolate them in ghettos, and finally deport them to labor and death camps. When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, millions of Polish Jews were brought under Nazi rule. The following year, German forces continued their victorious march into much of Europe, taking Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. In each country the

Nazis conquered, Jews were forced to wear a Jewish badge (using the Star of David) in public to be easily identified and were later isolated in ghettos. Conditions in these ghettos were horrendous; thousands died daily of starvation and disease. Still, the process was taking too long to suit the Nazis. By 1941, making Europe “Judenrein,” free of Jews, became a top Nazi priority.

On June 22, 1941, the German army invaded the Soviet Union. The military units were accompanied by Einsatzgruppen, special action groups whose task was to annihilate Jews through mass shootings. As soon as a territory was secured, they would gather its Jews and transport them to a killing site, usually on the edge of town, and proceed to shoot every man, woman, and child. These groups proceeded to kill over two million Jews in the Baltic States, the Ukraine, and Russia. At one site, Babi Yar, a unit assisted by local police shot 33,771 Jews.

For the Nazis, even the mass shootings were not quick or efficient enough. Hitler ordered the construction of six death camps in Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Beł ec, Chełmno, Majdanek, Sobibór, and Treblinka. The primary purpose of these camps was to kill as many people as quickly as possible.

In January 1942, at a pivotal Nazi meeting in Berlin known as the Wannsee Conference, the decision was made to transport Jews from ghettos all over Europe to be gassed in these death camps. Until the ghettos were completely liquidated, Jews were rounded up and forcibly taken to the local “umschlagplatz” or railway siding. Often people were forced to wait in brutal heat or bitter cold, sometimes for days, for trains to become available. When the trains finally arrived, families were often torn apart as SS guards and policemen shoved them into railroad boxcars designed to transport livestock. The journey, whether for hours or often for days, was made standing, without food, water, or sanitary facilities.

Upon arrival at the camps, the Nazis began their “selections,” sending victims to the right or to the left. Strong, young prisoners were sometimes “lucky” and were kept alive for slave labor. But even most of them eventually succumbed to starvation and disease. For the vast majority of women with children, people who were sick, older adults, and others “of no further use,” death was almost immediate. These people were marched hurriedly to a building containing gas chambers. They were ordered to undress and were then marched naked to a “shower room.” Up to 2,000 people at a time could be accommodated in some of these rooms. The chambers’ massive steel doors were shut and carbon monoxide or Zyklon B (a form of cyanide), came pouring out of the shower nozzles. In a matter of minutes, everyone was dead. Approximately half of all Jews killed in the Holocaust died in the gas chambers of these death camps.

Anti-Semitism and support for Nazism were not limited to Germany and Germans. Non-German paramilitary forces, mobs, and individuals were also responsible for the murder of many of the Jews swept away in the Holocaust. In Romania, the pro-Nazi “Iron Guard” and, in Lithuania, the “Iron Wolf” murdered thousands. Polish and Lithuanian mobs were responsible for killing many Jews. “Hiwis” or Ukrainian auxiliaries that operated under the control of the Germans participated in the liquidation of the ghettos and the subsequent massacres. Thousands were beheaded in Croatian concentration camps by Croatian military units, approximately 20,000 in the Jasnow camp alone.

The nations of Western Europe also gave a good deal of help to the Nazis. Pierre Laval, the Premier of Vichy, France, collaborated with the Nazis in the deportation of foreign Jews who had sought refuge in France; nearly 78,000 Jews

were placed on trains to death camps. Laval even insisted the trains come back for a few thousand children who had been left behind because of lack of space.

During the winter of 1944–1945, it was clear Germany was losing the war and needed to retreat. The SS decided to evacuate the outlying concentration camps and sent the malnourished and sick prisoners on “death marches.” The Nazis shot or left to die those who could not keep up the endless marching without food, water, adequate clothing, or shoes. Those that made it were badly in need of medical care and provisions. Disease became rampant, and starving, sickly inmates could only wait for allied liberation or death.

Many Jews who were liberated during the spring of 1945 were near death, and many tragically died shortly after liberation. Among those who died just before liberation was Anne Frank, the young Jewish girl whose diary during two years of hiding in Holland is one of the most famous works on the Holocaust. In March of 1945, one month before the British liberated her camp, Anne died of typhus at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

By the time Germany was defeated in May 1945, about two-thirds of Europe’s nine million Jews—including one and a half million children—had perished. The greatest carnage had taken place in Poland. Of the 3.3 million Polish Jews in 1939, only 20,000 survived the Holocaust. With the exception of Bulgaria, Albania, Denmark, and Italy, death tolls for Jews were extremely high in all regions occupied or controlled by the Germans.

The genocide of European Jews – which many scholars and others call simply “the Holocaust”<sup>1</sup> – “is perhaps the one genocide of which every educated person has heard.”<sup>2</sup> Between 1941 and 1945, five to six million Jews were systematically murdered by the Nazi regime, its allies, and its surrogates in the Nazi-occupied

territories. Yet despite the extraordinary scale and intensity of the genocide, its prominence in recent decades was far from preordained. The Second World War killed upwards of fifty million people in all, and attitudes following the Nazi defeat tended to mirror those during the war, when Western leaders and publics generally refused to ascribe special urgency to the Jewish catastrophe. Only with the Israeli capture of Adolf Eichmann, the epitome of the “banality of evil” in Hannah Arendt’s famous phrase, and his trial in Jerusalem in 1961, did the Jewish Shoah (catastrophe) begin to entrench itself as the paradigmatic genocide of human history. Even today, in the evaluation of genocide scholar Yehuda Bauer, “the impact of the Holocaust is growing, not diminishing” (4). This impact is expressed in the diverse debates about the Holocaust. Among the questions asked are: How could the systematic murder of millions of helpless individuals have sprung from one of the most developed and “civilized” of Western states? What are the links to European anti-semitism? How central a figure was Adolf Hitler in the genesis and unfolding of the slaughter? What part did “ordinary men” and “ordinary Germans” play in the extermination campaign? How extensive was Jewish resistance? What was the role of the Allies (notably Britain, France, the USSR, and the United States), both before and during the Second World War, in abandoning Jews to destruction at Nazi hands? And what is the relationship between the Jewish Holocaust and the postwar state of Israel? This chapter addresses these issues in its later sections, while also alighting on the debate over the alleged “uniqueness” of the Shoah.

Until the later nineteenth century, Jews were uniquely stigmatized within the European social hierarchy, often through stereotypical motifs that endure, in places, to the present.<sup>5</sup> Medieval Christianity “held the Jews to violate the moral order of the world. By rejecting Jesus, by allegedly having killed him, the Jews stood in defiant

opposition to the otherwise universally accepted conception of God and Man, denigrating and defiling, by their very existence, all that is sacred. As such, Jews came to represent symbolically and discursively much of the evil in the world.”<sup>6</sup> Jews – especially male Jews – were reviled as “uprooted, troublesome, malevolent, shiftless” (7). The Catholic Church, and later the Protestant offshoot founded by the virulently anti-semitic Martin Luther, assailed Jews as “thirsty bloodhounds and murderers of all Christendom” (8). The most primitive and powerful myth was the so-called “blood Jews were scapegoated and persecuted by many Christian regimes and populations in Europe. A medieval manuscript depicts a mass burning of Jews in 1349 as “punishment” for supposedly colluding with demonic forces to bring the Black Death (bubonic plague) to European shores.

The claim that Jews seized and murdered Gentile children in order to use their blood in the baking of ceremonial bread for the Passover celebration.<sup>9</sup> Fueled by this and other fantasies, anti-Jewish pogroms – localized campaigns of violence, killing, and repression – scarred European Jewish history. At various points, Jews who refused to convert to Christianity were also rounded up and expelled, most notoriously from Spain and Portugal in 1492.<sup>10</sup> The rise of modernity and the nation-state recast traditional anti-semitism in new and contradictory guises. (The term “anti-semitism” is a product of this era, coined by the German Wilhelm Marr in 1879.) On one hand, Jews were viewed as enemies of modernity. Cloistered in the cultural isolation of ghetto (to which previous generations had consigned them), they could never be truly part of the nation-state, which was rapidly emerging as the fulcrum of modern identity. On the other hand, for sectors suspicious of or threatened by change, Jews were seen as dangerous agents of modernity: as key players in oppressive economic institutions; as urban, cosmopolitan elements who threatened the unity and

identity of the Volk (people). It would be misleading, however, to present European history as one long campaign of discrimination and repression against Jews. For several centuries Jews in Eastern Europe “enjoyed a period of comparative peace, tranquility and the flowering of Jewish religious life” (12). They were even more prominent, and valued, in Muslim Spain. Moreover, ideologies of nationalism sometimes followed the liberal “meltingpot” motif exemplified by the United States. Those Jews who sought integration with their societies could be accepted. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are seen as something of a golden age for Jews in France, Britain, and Germany, even while some two-and-a-half million Jews were fleeing pogroms in tsarist Russia.

Germany was widely viewed as one of the more tolerant European societies; Prussia, the first German state to grant citizenship to its Jews, did so as early as 1812. How, then, could Germany turn first to persecuting, then to slaughtering, nearly two-thirds of the Jews of Europe? Part of the answer lies in the fact that, although German society was in many ways tolerant and progressive, German politics was never liberal or democratic, in the manner of both Britain and France.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, German society was deeply destabilized by defeat in the First World War, and by the imposition of a humiliating peace settlement at Versailles in 1919. Germany was forced to shoulder full blame for the outbreak of the “Great War.” It lost its overseas colonies, along with some of its European territories; its armed forces were reduced to a fraction of their former size; and onerous reparations were demanded. “A tidal wave of shame and resentment, experienced even by younger men who had not seen military service, swept the nation,” wrote Richard Plant. “Many people tried to digest the bitter defeat by searching furiously for scapegoats” (14). These dark currents ran beneath the political order, the Weimar Republic, established after the war.

Democratic but fragile, it presided over economic chaos – first, the hyperinflation of 1923, which saw the German mark slip to 4.2 trillion to the dollar, and then the widespread unemployment of the Great Depression, beginning in 1929. The result was political extremism. Its prime architect and beneficiary was the NSDAP (the National Socialist or “Nazi” party), founded by Adolf Hitler and sundry alienated colleagues. Hitler, a decorated First World War veteran and failed artist from Vienna, assumed the task of resurrecting Germany and imposing its hegemony on all Europe. This vision would lead to the deaths of tens of millions of people. But it was underpinned in Hitler’s mind by an epic hatred of Jews – “these black parasites of the nation,” as he called them in *Mein Kampf*, the tirade he penned while in prison following an abortive coup attempt in 1923.

As the failed putsch indicated, Hitler’s path to power was far from direct. By 1932, he seemed to many to have passed his peak. The Nazis won only a minority of parliamentary seats in that year’s elections; more Germans voted for parties of the Left than of the Right. But divisions between the Socialists and Communists made the Nazis the largest single party in the Reichstag, and allowed Hitler to become Chancellor in January 1933. Once installed in power, the Nazis proved unstoppable. Within three months, they had seized “total control of [the] German state, abolishing its federalist structure, dismantling democratic government and outlawing political parties and trade unions.” The Enabling Act of March 23, 1933 gave Hitler “carte blanche to terrorize and neutralize all effective political opposition” (16). Immediately thereafter, the Nazis’ persecutory stance towards Jews became plain. Within a few months, Jews saw their businesses placed under Nazi boycott; their mass dismissal from hospitals, the schools, and the civil service; and public book-burnings of Jewish and other “degenerate” works. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 stripped Jews of



citizenship and gave legal shape to the Nazis' race-based theories: intermarriage or sexual intercourse between non-Jews and Jews was prohibited.

With the Nuremberg edicts, and the threat of worse measures looming, increasing numbers of Jews fled abroad. The abandonment of homes and capital in Germany meant penury abroad – the Nazis would allow only a fraction of one's wealth to be exported. The unwillingness of the outside world to accept Jewish refugees meant that many more Jews longed to leave than actually could. Hundreds of those who remained committed suicide as Nazi rule imposed upon them a “social death” (17).

The persecution mounted further with the Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass) on November 9–10, 1938, “a proto-genocidal assault” (18) that targeted Jewish properties, residences, and persons. Several dozen Jews were killed outright, billions of deutschmarks in damage was inflicted, and some 30,000 male Jews were rounded up and imprisoned in concentration camps. Now attempts to flee increased dramatically, but this occurred just as Hitler was driving Europe towards crisis and world war, and as Western countries all but closed their frontiers to Jewish would-be emigrants.

In recent years, a great deal of scholarly energy has been devoted to Hitler's and the Nazis' evolving relationship with the German public. Two broad conclusions may be drawn from the work of Robert Gellately, Eric Johnson, and David Bankier – and also from one of the most revelatory personal documents of the Nazi era, the diaries of Victor Klemperer (1881–1960). (Klemperer was a Jew from the German city of Dresden who survived the Nazi period, albeit under conditions of privation and persecution, thanks to his marriage to an “Aryan” woman.). The first insight is that Nazi rule, and the isolation of the Jews for eventual expulsion and extermination,

counted on a broad wellspring of popular support. This was based on Hitler's pledge to return Germany to social order, economic stability, and world-power status. The basic thesis of Gellately's book, *Backing Hitler*:

Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany, is that "Hitler was largely successful in getting the backing, one way or another, of the great majority of citizens." Moreover, this was based on the anathematizing of whole classes of citizens: "the Germans generally turned out to be proud and pleased that Hitler and his henchmen were putting away certain kinds of people who did not fit in, or who were regarded as 'outsiders,' 'asocials,' 'useless eaters,' or 'criminals. (qtd. in MacDonald 19)

Victor Klemperer's diaries provide an "extraordinarily acute analysis of the day-to-day workings of German life under Hitler" and "a singular chronicle of German society's progressive Nazification."<sup>20</sup> Klemperer oscillated between a conviction that German society had become thoroughly Nazified, and the ironic conviction (given his expulsion from the body politic) that the Germany he loved would triumph. "I certainly no longer believe that [the Nazi regime] has enemies inside Germany," he wrote in May 1936. "The majority of the people is content, a small group accepts Hitler as the lesser evil, no one really wants to be rid of him. . . . And all are afraid for their livelihood, their life, all are such terrible cowards." Yet as late as March 1940, with the Second World War well underway, "I often ask myself where all the wild anti-Semitism is. For my part I encounter much sympathy, people help me out, but fearfully of course." He noted numerous examples of verbal contempt, but also a surprising number of cases where colleagues and acquaintances went out of their way to greet him warmly, and even police officers who accorded

him treatment that was “very courteous, almost comically courteous.” “Every Jew has his Aryan angel,” one of his fellow inmates in an overcrowded communal house told him in 1941. But by then Klemperer had been stripped of his job, pension, house, and typewriter; he would shortly lose his right to indulge even in his cherished cigarettes. In September 1941, he was forced to put on a yellow Star of David identifying him as a Jew. It left him feeling “shattered”: nearly a year later, he would describe the star as “torture – I can resolve a hundred times to pay no attention, it remains torture” (21)

Hundreds of miles to the east, the program of mass killing was gearing up, as Klemperer and other Jews – not to mention ordinary Germans – were increasingly aware.

If Jews came to be the prime targets of Nazi demonization and marginalization, they were not the only ones, and for some years they were not necessarily the main ones. Communists (depicted as closely linked to Jewry) and other political opponents, handicapped and senile Germans, homosexuals, Roma (Gypsies), Polish intellectuals, vagrants, and other “asocial” elements all occupied the attention of the Nazi authorities during this period, and were the victims of “notorious achievements in human destruction” exceeding the persecution of the Jews until 1941.<sup>22</sup> Of these groups, political opponents (especially communists) and the handicapped and senile were most at risk of extreme physical violence, torture, and murder. “The political and syndical [trade union] left,” wrote Arno Mayer, “remained the principal target of brutal repression well past the time of the definitive consolidation of the new regime in July–August 1934” (23). In the slaughter of the handicapped, meanwhile, the Nazis first “discovered that it was possible to murder multitudes,” and that “they could easily recruit men and women to do the killings”

(24). It explores the fate of political oppositionists and the handicapped under Nazi rule in greater detail.

The wounds of the Holocaust—known in Hebrew as Shoah, or catastrophe—were slow to heal. Survivors of the camps found it nearly impossible to return home, as in many cases they had lost their families and been denounced by their non-Jewish neighbors. As a result, the late 1940s saw an unprecedented number of refugees and other displaced populations moving across Europe.

### **III. Representing Holocaust as Cultural Trauma**

In the wake of World War II, the Nazi genocide of European Jews has come to stand for "the unspeakable," because it has posed serious challenge or threat to the representation of suffering, the articulation of identity, and the practice of ethics. The "unspeakable" here means incapable of being expressed in words; inexpressible, indescribable, ineffable, or not capable of being verbally expressed: unutterable, indescribable. In other words, "unspeakable" means verbally unrepresentable. The Holocaust, as a traumatic event, is "unspeakable," in the sense of 'inexpressible,' 'indescribable,' 'ineffable,' or 'unutterable,' is therefore to state as a matter of fact that this traumatic historical event simply exceeds all means of verbal representation of the Holocaust atrocities.

When we talk about the Holocaust, we cannot help recalling Auschwitz which has always symbolized human sufferings and will always continue to do so as long as this human civilization exists refers to the concentration and extermination camps operated by Nazis. As Naomi Mandel rightly notes that Auschwitz refers to "uncomfortable past" meaning unrepresentable and unspeakable past (204). As the helpless living people were reduced to "smoke and ashes" in Auschwitz (204), the condition was so horrifying that even in the present time people become speechless by reading the Holocaust documents and literature. The relation to the Auschwitz in particular and the Holocaust in general is often articulated in terms of an inability to perceive the dreadful events. This focuses on the limits of thought, language, and representation. Naomi Mandel further writes.

Auschwitz in particular, and the Holocaust, in general, are commonly referred to us unspeakable, unthinkable, inconceivable, incomprehensible and challenging (or forcing us to reestablish, or to

rethink, or to acknowledge, or to probe) the "limits of representation.'

The more we speak about Auschwitz, it seems, the more prevalent and compelling our gestures towards the limits of our speech, our knowledge, and our world. (204)

Thus, the terms 'Holocaust' and 'Auschwitz', which refer to atrocities, evoke a sense of "total destruction, a complete annihilation, an absolute devastation" of the Jews (210).

Unsurprisingly, the Holocaust is perceived in terms of totality, or that the sheer magnitude of the destruction is considered to pose a specific problem to representation. The horrific events of vastness and violence are assumed to be "unique, unprecedented, offering a specific and, apparently, irresolvable problem to experience, imagination, conceptualization, and, finally, representation" (210). As the Holocaust atrocities are irresolvable problems, they are unspeakable events.

Holocaust experiences take the form of belatedness to be expressed as this belatedness in the understanding and representation of traumatic experiences takes the form of unspeakability. Geoffrey Hartman does not deny knowledge and representation as such, but suggests "the existence of a traumatic kind [of knowledge], one that cannot be made entirely conscious in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion" (537). Although he notes that traumatic knowledge can never be totally captured, Hartman does not ponder the possibility of narrativizing such traumatic events within available interpretive frameworks. Nor does he consider the conditions under which such a knowledge can be made possible. The ultimate conclusion in the face of immense horrific events may then simply be, in the words of Dominick LaCapra, "silent awe" (93), as these events lay hidden and haunt the victims throughout their lives after survival though they cannot express their pain accurately.

Traumatic events affect the victims especially children in a much more profound way than they do adults, because the Holocaust is a trauma of such unspeakable magnitude, we can barely imagine the complex effects it must have had on Jewish children. Witnessing comes in as many forms as the trauma that gives birth to it. The Holocaust, undeniably one of the greatest traumatic events in human history, still resonates into the twenty-first century. The echoes that haunt those who survived continue to reach people and their children and even others who did not share the experience directly. So, undoubtedly, holocaust trauma is unrepresentable and unspeakable evil. This unspeakable is also what cannot be physically spoken or pronounced, like an infinite word or an infinite scream. As Mandel writes:

Its dimensions are located in the challenge posed to the psyche by a traumatic experience and the subsequent repetition and deferral that constitutes the work of mourning. These psychic dimensions of the unspeakable are echoed in the taboos or injunctions against certain speech acts by the community: our reluctance to shout "Auschwitz" on a crowded street corner, or to force Holocaust survivors to address what they prefer not to speak about. (212)

In this sense, the unspeakable takes the form of trauma, not only for the individual survivors but for a collective post-Holocaust culture, which is perceived to be traumatized by the presence of the Holocaust in the past. Regarding the Holocaust as a traumatic event includes an assumption of the Holocaust's unspeakability to the construction of a collective identity that is presumably traumatized by the presence of the Holocaust in its history. In this way, the terms "Holocaust" and the "unspeakable" are almost synonymous as they share common historical and accidental features.

It is really worth pondering as to how the Holocaust will be remembered in the coming decades when those who survived the tragic event or were witness to it are no longer alive. This is a dilemma facing historians of the Holocaust today, whose primary task is to give the future as accurate an account of the past as is as possible. So, related to this are implications of representation. How one should represent the Holocaust based on witness testimony to the future is an area of immense debate. Many feel that, there is no way the Holocaust can be represented, in such a way that it begins to show what life was like for those who lived through it and even those who did not. While there are many surviving documents from the Holocaust, the most important source are witness testimony as in the creation of Yizkor Books for the destroyed Jewish community. Survivor testimonies were also used as evidence, both legal and historical, of atrocities to confirm the real nature of Nazism. Tony Kushner notes that earlier, the focus was "on the gathering of information on the impact on the individual than about acting as qualitative proof of the Nazi atrocities" (276). But the tendency to give priority to legal sphere disregarding the survivor evidence in favour of documentary evidence--which reflected legal tradition -- gave no status and respect to the victims of Nazism. Friedlander sees flaw in this as he, as a historiographer, is well aware of the tendency to remove the victim when dealing with Nazi and anti-Semitism. He thus states that surrounding world and "victim's attitudes' attitudes, reactions and fate are an integral part of unfolding history" of holocaust (280). He further writes:

In many works the implicit assumptions regarding the victims' generalized hopelessness and passivity, or their inability to change the course of events leading to their extermination, have turned them into a static and abstract element of the historical background. It is too often



forgotten that Nazi attitudes and policies cannot be fully assessed without knowledge of themselves. Here, therefore, at each stage in the description of the evolving Nazi policies and the attitudes of German and European societies as they impinge on the evolution of those policies, the fate, the attitudes, and sometimes the initiatives of the victims are given major importance. Indeed, their voices are essential if we want to attain an understanding of this past. For, it is their voices that reveal what was known and what could be known; theirs were the only voices that conveyed both the clarity of insight and the total blindness of human beings confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality. (qtd. in Kushner 280)

In this way, survivor testimony, whether written, oral or video form has to be taken seriously on its own terms. It becomes distorted if used crudely or represented artistically. When representing the Holocaust for future generations, one must be careful not to distort or leave out anything that may change the meaning of the story. Beyond this it is hard to decide how much leeway a representation should have in changing the testimony. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of making modern day representations of the Holocaust.

As more representations are made there is a greater risk that there may emerge a distorted or asymmetrical narrative of the Holocaust. Although it would be possible for anyone learning about the Holocaust to look at numerous accounts of testimony in order to try and get a more balanced picture, in today's world with popular culture's increased influence, it seems more likely that they would rather "see" the story of the Holocaust, rather than read about it. In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi doubts whether we can ever fully represent and understand the Holocaust.

"Then for the first time we became aware," he observes, "that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man" (26). Since the late 1960s, attempts to understand, represent, and analyze the Holocaust--to give language to the event--have reproduced immensely with seemingly little recognition of the dilemmas raised by Levi's warning words. It is necessary to address the questions as to how the extermination of some six million people can possibly be represented and known and whether it is possible to recollect and represent the uniquely catastrophic event.

The Holocaust was an event that involved tremendous suffering and agony in the sense that not only did the Nazi system destroy Jews, gypsies, communists, and homosexuals among others, but also they were negated their humanity. In this way, it is different from all the other genocides and atrocities performed throughout the world history in different places. Plunka points out this difference:

Perhaps it was its sustained barbarity or the unimaginable enormity of the slaughter that has led historians and philosophers to describe the Holocaust as the seminal event of the twentieth century. While genocide obviously involves widespread killing, the Holocaust seems to be unique in the way that a race was degraded, forced to suffer, and dehumanized (in order for the murderer to be less burdened with the guilt when exterminating "vermin"); thus Jews were not allowed just to die, for they must also die in agony. [...] Unlike any other historical experience, the Holocaust has altered our notions of human dignity, our conventional concepts of God and humanity, and the humanistic idea of civilization aspiring to the norms of cultural existence. (3)

Therefore, how can a survivor experiencing this agony and seeing the limits of humanity transmit the truth to the new generations is a significant issue.

The Holocaust is one of the single most striking events of the 20th century. It inflicted a psychological wound on the world that is only beginning to heal, hindered by similar atrocities since. Even if the damage does fully fade in time, the fascination with the Holocaust and the events surrounding it may never fade, nor should it. Many mediums have been used to immortalize this great tragedy, and there has been no shortage of inspiration; no part of the Holocaust could be considered insignificant. Drawing on a wide range of texts, Michael Rothberg puts forth an overarching framework for understanding representations of the Holocaust. Rothberg demonstrates how the Holocaust as a traumatic event makes three fundamental demands on representation: a demand for documentation, a demand for reflection on the limits of representation, and a demand for engagement with the public sphere and commodity culture. So, Rothberg argues that it is absolutely necessary to represent holocaust atrocities in documents as he advocates for the "absolutely central and unavoidable need for reflection on the means and modes of representation in all scholarly and lay approaches to the Holocaust" (2). Thus, he believes that the Holocaust provides new avenues of access to disparate aspects of twentieth century culture and contemporary cultural theory. He focuses on traumatic realism, a concept he derived from Holocaust testimonial writing, but that also has implications for postwar cultural theory. By focusing attention on the intersection of the everyday and the extreme in the experience and writing of Holocaust survivors, he writes:

Traumatic realism provides an aesthetic and cognitive solution to the conflicting demands inherent in representing and understanding genocide. Traumatic realism mediates between the realist and

antirealist positions in Holocaust studies and marks the necessity of considering how the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of genocide intersect and coexist. (9)

In this way, Rothberg, by deconstructing the boundaries of conventional representation of horrific events, brings the reader into the space of the in-between and, by invoking the realm of the known, pulls the reader into the unknown moments of horror of the Holocaust.

To conclude, the representation of traumatic events in art is a controversial issue. If art is interpreted as an illusion of reality, the depiction of such an event through art would be impossible. At the same time, the reality of the Holocaust cannot be conveyed with any aesthetic purpose, as explained by Theodor Adorno, who states that “after Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry” (162). So, although the accurate of the representation of the Holocaust in art is the possibility of trivialization of the event and the suffering it created, representing the Holocaust in art can be useful in some ways. It can educate the audiences who may be unfamiliar or naive about what has been described, and it can force us to confront the human suffering and share the responsibility.

The primary focus of the trauma theory is with the temporary delay as the discourse of history which raises the question of the crisis of truth – a question that “asks how we can have access to our historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy has a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access” (6).

Reminding us of the about inaccessibility of trauma, Caruth shows the way in which trauma can make possible survival through different modes of therapeutic, literary and pedagogical encounter. Turning away from a notion of traumatic,

experience as a neurotic distortion Caruth brings us back to the ever surprising fact that “trauma is not experienced as a mere repression of defense” but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment (10). Stressing on the potential of trauma she argues that trauma enables the traumatized subject get over the shock of the traumatic moment, for it is not only a repeated suffering of the event, but is also a continual living of its site. A sharing of traumatic experience through the mutual acts of speaking and listening the victims and survivors confront it and word through it. Besides, she says that effect of trauma “lies units belatedness [and] in its refusal to be simply located” (8). This means that traumatic narrative is strongly referential. The construction of history develops from this delayed response to trauma, which permits history to rise where immediate understanding may not be possible. This refers that a concept of trauma can be of great value and significance in the study of history and historical narrative in particular and all sorts of narrative to general.

Since trauma is dynamic and has historical power, it offers us new understanding of the [...] disasters on the talk shows that goes beyond discussions of market share and public taste. In addition, the idea of trauma allows an interpretation of cultural symptoms of growth, wounds, scars on social body and its compulsive repeated action. A theory of trauma, in this sense, offers a vigorous way of reconceptualizing significant directions in the critical theory itself. James Berger opines that trauma theory converses with diverse:

Critical vocabularies which problematize representation and attempt to define its limit – discourses of the sublime, the sacred the apocalyptic, and other in guise. Trauma theory is another such discourse of the unrepresentable, of the event or object that destabilizes language and

demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with what went before. In troubling ways, these discourses blur into each other, creating a traumatic – sacred –sublime alterity [...] in which historical complexity and historical pain are effaced or ‘redeemed’. (573-574)

He believes that acting out trauma helps to convert the past into memory that might provide a measure or responsible control over one’s behavior with respect to it and the present necessities of life. In another work *Trauma, Absence, and Loss* LaCapra argues:

The necessary acting out – of trauma in victims and empathetic unsettlement [...] in secondary witness should not be seen as foreclosing attempts to work through the past [traumatic experience] and its losses, both in victims or other agents and in secondary witnesses and that the ability to make the distinction between absence and loss [...] is one aspect of complex process of working through. (699)

LaCapra, in the same work, furthers his opinion that in respect to traumatic losses acting out may be a necessary condition of working through, at least for the victims. Possession by past may “never be fully overcome or transcended, and working through may at best enable some distance or critical perspective that is acquired with extremely difficult and not achieved once and for all” (9716-717).

Among three psychological issues raised by LaCapra in his theory of trauma, the most pervasive one is transference. The failure to terms with the discursive return of some traumatic event usually signals the failure to recognize one’s own emotional

and ideological investment in the event and its representation. In psychoanalysis transference is recognized as:

a return of the repressed, or rather a more conscious summoning of the repressed; transference repeats or acts out a past event or relationship in a new therapeutic setting that allows for critical evaluation and change. Transference is the occasion for working through the traumatic symptom” (Berger 576).

It is, therefore, significant to acknowledge that trauma is active and that one is implicated in its destructive effects. LaCapra argues that construction of various redemptive narratives by historians and the defenders of demands Heidegger is failure to recognize their transference relations to their objects.

LaCapra categorizes trauma into two types: one as historical trauma and the other as structural trauma. In addition he sees two very important implications of the historical trauma. Firstly the historical trauma, he argues, provides a method for rethinking postmodern and poststructuralist theories in relation to the historical context. By this he signals that “the postmodern and post holocaust become mutually intertwined issues that are best addressed in relation to each other” (qtd. in Berger 576). This relation would include a new traumatic perception of the fixation on the sublime or the almost obsessive preoccupation with loss, aporia, dispossession, and delayed meaning. Secondly, historically trauma provides an original reevaluation of the debates over the literary canon. LaCapra advises the literary canon set on the basis of traditional narrow frame be devised for that does not or cannot contribute permanently to install an ideological order. Historical trauma helps to dismantle that narrow cage of literary canon and “foreground ideological problems and to work through them critically” (qtd. in Berger 576). For LaCapra, historical trauma is specific and not

everyone is subject to it entitled to the subject-position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim's voice or subject-position.

According to LaCapra, structural trauma is related to absence, gap and anxiety and radical ambivalence. This ambivalence of structural trauma is converted into or equated with "a constitutive or original loss [...] as an unexamined presupposition for the postulation of melancholy as the origin or source of [the] subjectivity". Moreover, unlike in historical trauma everyone is subject to structural trauma. Structural trauma is often understood as deeply ambivalent as both shattering and painful and the occasion for ecstatic elation or sublime. In some problematic sense structural trauma is precondition of historical trauma that related to particular events that do indeed motivation for combination of structural and historical trauma is the elusiveness of the traumatic experience. In historical trauma, it is possible to locate to located traumatizing event. However it is not dated or [...] punctual" (724). Similarly in structural trauma it may not be possible to figure out the experience of trauma because of its delayed temporality.

The delayed temporality of 'latency'. To recall Freud's view, trauma is an experience in that an early event repeats in a later event an early event for which one was not prepared to feel anxiety a later event that somehow recalls the early one and triggers a traumatic responses (725). This delayed temporality and the difficult nature of painful experience of trauma provides a distinction between structural and historical trauma. In this point LaCapra argues that:

The traumatizing events in historical trauma can be determined [...] while structural trauma (like absence) is not an event but an anxiety producing condition of possibility related to the potential for the historical dramatization. When structural trauma is reduced to or



figured as, an event, one has genesis of myth wherein trauma is enacted in a story or narrative. (725)

It is essential to see what Caruth says about trauma and myth – historical narrative. In *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* she is mainly concerned with the questions of reference and representation. In addition, she discusses how trauma becomes text and wound becomes voice. And she outlines “a theory of trauma as an instigator of historical narrative” (577). Similarly, her introduction “The Wound and the Voice” opens a new ground on a problematic explored by Geoffrey Hartman, Elaine Scarry, and Slavoj Žižek regarding the relation between pain and language, narrative historical and ethnic dimensions. Caruth argues that when trauma first occurs is very difficult to comprehend. It is only a period of latency, that it can be placed in a narrative because “the impact of the event lies precisely in its belatedness in its refusal to be simply located” (8). This means traumatic narrative, then, is strongly referential and complex, but not in any simple and direct way. Besides, the construction of a history develops from this delayed response to trauma that permits “history develops from this delayed response to trauma that permits “history to arise where immediate understanding may not” be possible (qtd. in Berger 578).

According to Caruth trauma is “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which response to the event occurs, in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (9). Her point is that we cannot experience traumatic event at the moment of its occurrence, it is fully apparent only in connection with another place and in another time. While coming all the way meaning or referring physical shock to the psychical wound the phenomena of trauma covers psychic life to public history. There is very

contemporary attempt on trauma studies that reflect “our sense that violence is coming nearer, like a storm- a storm that may have already moved into the core of our being” (503). Besides, trauma has emerged as the site of amalgamation of various issues as it regarded a multidisciplinary discourse.

Finally, theory of trauma has affected a range of disciplines and cultural expression as well as various issues. Besides trauma theory dismantles the traditional historiography and demands a new sphere and language in order to recapture and reinterpret what is othered and silenced by the history or myth. Though theory of trauma is associated with psychical issues it converses with other cultural theories and discourse. This conversion makes trauma not only multidisciplinary discourse but also a truly postmodern theory.

#### **IV. Exploration of Trauma in *If This is a Man* and *Night***

As the word "Holocaust" represents images of death, devastation, and dehumanization, it remains, for the most part, fixed in the public mentality as synonym for destruction, specifically the destruction of human life and identity for the narrators in *If This is a Man* and *Night*. While the devastation and the unjust annihilation of a large number of human lives can never be justifying or constructive, the literature generated in response to the Holocaust, particularly the memoirs of survivors, explores the endurance and indefatigability of humanity. Undoubtedly, the Holocaust presents the physical aspects of horror; the emaciated prisoners, seemingly omnipotent guards, and manifestations of death around every corner. The Holocaust has, however, is more than just a physically executed destruction of humanity. It was an ideological war, an operation of precise and finely tuned warfare against the humanity of victims. The Nazis sought to break down families, and bodies, but they did not stop at corporeal destruction. Rather, they sought to destroy the abstract intellectual, religious, social and cultural existence of their victims through dehumanizing processes leading to unceremonious and anonymous death.

Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* was first published in 1947 in Italian as *Se questo è un uomo*. It describes his arrest as a member of the Italian anti-fascist resistance during the Second World War and his imprisonment in the Auschwitz concentration camp from February 1944 until the camp was liberated on January 27, 1945. *Night* (1956), on the other hand, is a work by Jewish American writer, Elie Wiesel. It is about his experience with his father in the Nazi German concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald in 1944–1945, at the height of the Holocaust and toward the end of the Second World War. Wiesel writes about the death of God and his own increasing disgust with humanity. This dissertation studies the

representation of the trauma of the holocaust in Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. While the first book discusses primary and secondary witnessing, the second one unravels the cultural templates through which the witnessing of trauma is narrativized to forge a collective identity.

In relation to religio-socio-cultural identity, humanity, and communal identification, the writings of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi are significant. Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *If This is A Man*, are two texts that strongly relate the personal experience of the concentration camps, centering on the unifying theme of the fragmentation of specific fundamental aspects of self-definition. In these texts, the Holocaust experience impacts socio-cultural and religious identity.

Wiesel, one of the better-known authors to draw upon personal Holocaust experience, was an Orthodox Jew born in Transylvania in 1928. His hometown, Sighet, was occupied by German troops in early 1944, and he, along with the rest of the local Jewish population, was sent to the Nazi work camps. He and his father were sent to Auschwitz and later, Buchenwald. Through *Night* Wiesel grapples with issues of theodicy, the existence of God, God's silence in the face of suffering if He does exist, and religion's ineffectual role as a reconstructive social structure in his post-Holocaust life. The progression of religious identity that he details is not a simple case of devotion becoming atheism in the face of trauma. Rather it is a reappraisal of a religious identity into which he, as an individual, can no longer fit because of what he has lived and witnessed.

Primo Levi's *If This is A Man* includes both the methods by which the Nazis deprived their victims of the symbols and structures of humanity, and the ways in which prisoners resurrected elements of the outside world in order to resist. Levi was an Italian chemist, born in Italy in 1919. He was also Jewish and part of an anti-

Fascist group, so the concept of resistance is a part of his pre-Holocaust identity before it is an element of his post-Holocaust writing. Because of his Jewish heritage and anti-Fascist activity, Levi was arrested by German police and deported to Auschwitz in 1944. *If This is A Man* is a narrative of physical and intellectual endurance, a documentation of the mechanical and dehumanizing techniques the Nazis used to strip inmates of their personhood, and a reappraisal of the concept of the civilized and enlightened European culture in the face of the dehumanizing Holocaust experience.

Through these two texts, the impact of the Holocaust experience is communicated, recreated, commented upon, condemned, illustrated, and explored. In the course of this analysis each of these works serves as a demonstration of the Holocaust impact on a different facet of the complex folds of humanity. Wiesel's text addresses religious identity, as composed of belief and the societal aspect of religion. Levi's memoir deals with the struggle to preserve intellectual subjectivity.

The forms of representation affect collective trauma. There is a gap between the traumatic event and its representation. Trauma theorists call this gap 'a trauma process'. According to Alexander "for trauma to emerge at cultural level a new master narrative has to be successfully established" by those who aim at projecting the trauma claim to the audience or readers or public. He argues that a successful process of representation of the collective memory of traumatic event has to "deal with the following questions: (a) the nature of the pain; (b) the nature of the victim; (c) relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience; (d) attribution of responsibility" (qtd. in Tota 85). This model of representing cultural trauma also encompasses the type of the institutional arena with respect to which trauma's meaning can be produced. Alexander classifies six different types of arena: religious, aesthetic, legal, scientific, mass

media, and state bureaucracy. From the perspective of whatsoever institution trauma gets represented, the act reproduces the collective memory so that trauma takes its shape in the public discourse. Through this 'trauma process' the collective memory and identity are affected and even do get modified.

Religious belief functions as personal as well as socio-cultural and communal force in man's life. Personal monotheistic religion, including both the ideological beliefs of a faith and the membership in a community of like-minded believers, shapes the way people view not only themselves but also those around them and humanity holistically. So, because of the intensely individualized nature of cultural and religious belief and the communal nature of shared belief, the loss or destruction of either aspect results in an irrevocable shift in the understanding of oneself, as Elie Wiesel's *Night* on the Holocaust and faith reveals.

*Night* is the terrifying record of Elie Wiesel's memories and experiences of his and his family at the Auschwitz concentration camp. Through a text of Holocaust literature, it polemically explores the relationship between our stories and our identity as well as the extent to which we all witness of history and messengers to humanity. Apart from the portrayal of certain contemporary concerns such as violence, human ethics, human behaviour, punishment, trauma, memory, legacy, etc., what is remarkable in the book is the Preface by the author, which is quick to enhance our understanding of how preface as a species of writing or as a formal literary convention can provide a theory to a literary genre, here the Holocaust literature.

The opening paragraph of the 'Preface' delineates the significance of the *Night* on its author's life – both as a holocaust survivor and a creative writer. The very first sentence appropriates the author's life-span with the book having one hundred and fifteen pages of testimony to his holocaust experience. This appropriation is

supported when he mentions, “To write your memoirs is to draw up a balance sheet of your life so far” (16). The celebration *Night* is thus seen in its author’s appropriation of his life with the birth of the text. As through *Night*, Wiesel seeks to impart a powerful knowledge against the irrational, illegal, and inhuman ideology of the Nazis—“For the poetics of literary testimony not only framed the writer’s experiences . . . but the language, tropes, and selected details of their texts ultimately shape our understanding of events afterwards” (Young 407).

Wiesel is hinting at the trauma that he and his fellow Jews underwent. His expression of the trauma through words reflects his individual contribution to the formation of ‘cultural trauma’. Alexander clarifies this as “The cultural construction of trauma begins with . . . a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution” (Alexander, 2004). In this connection, the present researcher realizes how literature of this sort can be viewed as evidence. The survival narrative also depicts how the individual trauma can contribute towards understanding the collective trauma.

Wiesel seems to be problematizing the possible connection between his physical survival from the camp and his consequent writing of this book. He rejects the logic that his survival was destined for his creative writing. However, there is an indirect connotation to this dichotomy as far as his belief in Judaism is concerned. He evokes a divine intervention to his survival. He negates his survival as miraculous, and considers it as a chance, not mere but divine. For in him, as in the case of all Jews, lay the God. For Wiesel, there is an inextricable relationship between God and the Jews. This is seen in his commentary, “God could have, should have, and interrupted His own suffering by calling a halt to the martyrdom of innocents” (105). Wiesel therefore tries to justify his survival by writing this book—justifying the ways

of God to man; as did Milton in the poem "On His Blindness". A Miltonic maneuver of his survival life as seen in his confession, "I needed to give some meaning to my survival" (viii) or "to justify my own survival" (2).

This act of recording or providing a testimony which Wiesel considers to be a moral duty can otherwise be viewed as an act of writing back, a response to the oppressive Nazi ideology. Alan L. Berger's statement can support my claim here, "Wiesel's stories present a narrative theology that is simultaneously reassuring and subversive as he views all of history through the prism of Auschwitz" (Berger 282).

In Wiesel's *Night* we can examine the destruction of ideological religious identity and communal religious affiliation specifically because of the author's Holocaust experience. As a result of which he finds it difficult to adjust to cultural and religious life as the Holocaust experience illustrates the dissociation caused by the horrors of both the prison camp experience and the years afterwards. So, Wiesel's text shows two separate forms personal disconnect from the foundations of religious identification as he traces his early disconnect from the internal ideological core of his faith; his personal belief in and understanding of God.

During the year Wiesel spent in concentration camps, he lost his faith in God, lost his innocence, and went through more terrifying things than could ever be imagined. Wiesel lost his faith in God while he was in the death camps of Auschwitz: "My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy. I was nothing but ashes now, but I felt myself to be stronger than this Almighty to whom my life had been bound for so long" (68). Wiesel rebels against God and he does not understand why God is letting all of these horrible things happen to the Jewish people. The Jews are continually praising his name, even as all these horrible things are happening to them. "But look at these men



whom you have betrayed, what do they do? They pray before you! They praise your name!"(68). The whole psyche of Jewish people is traumatized as a result of this experience. This causes a loss of identity and meaning and big rupture in socio cultural and religious fabric as Eyerman calls "a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric" (2). Wiesel loses his innocence the first day he reaches the death camp at Auschwitz. "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky" (34). Wiesel loses his innocence because at such a young age he sees such great evil that can come from mankind that no one ever deserves to see. Wiesel also loses his soul and he believes he will never forget the things that happened to him. "Never shall I forget these moments that murdered my god and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes. Never shall I forget these things, even were I condemned to live as long as God himself. Never" (34). In this sense, it is a cultural trauma that haunts Jewish community.

The evil of the concentration camps causes dramatic changes in Wiesel. He is traumatized after witnessing the horror that he loses all meaning, judgment and rationality. When Wiesel's father is dying of dysentery he keeps calling for his son. However, Wiesel does not answer his father's cries even though he knew that his father is dying. When Wiesel wakes up the next morning he feels a sense of relief:

I woke up at dawn on January. On my father's cot there lay another sick person. They must have taken him away before daybreak and taken him to the crematorium. . . . His last word had been my name. He had called out to me and I had not answered. I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I was out of tears. And deep

inside me, if I could have searched the recess of my feeble conscience,  
I might have found something like: Free at last!" (23)

Wiesel's father dies and he feels relieved. This is what the evil did to him; it took away all feeling he had and it took away his soul. So, in *Night*, the autobiographical account of his Holocaust experience, Wiesel shares the ways in which his experiences at Auschwitz and Buchenwald damage his religious identification as a Jew. The incomprehensible evil he witnesses and experiences first hand shatters Wiesel's previous understanding of the role of religion in his life.

Wiesel's narrator in *Night*, initially a pious teenager studying Kabala, brings us on his journey to Auschwitz and Buchenwald and makes us witnesses to the nearly total devastation of his faith in God, the core of his religious identification as a Jew. "The beloved objects that we had carried with us from place to place were now left behind in the wagon and, with them, finally, our illusions" (29), he writes. What was once faith in the goodness of God breaks down into an illusion and a rejected belief.

The horror he witnesses in the concentration camp makes him hate the existence of God who is unable to alleviate His peoples' suffering, and, worst of all, His inability or refusal to infuse that suffering with religious meaning. The narrator experiences a loss of faith, and that faith can be lost in many ways and in Wiesel's description, the murder of God does not collapse eternity or strip it of religious mystery. As Seidman notes, "where the eternal God once reigned, henceforth shall live the eternal memory of the witness" (2). Where once his relationship with God defined the narrator's understanding of his religion, now that definition and understanding cannot withstand the "memory of the witness" (Seidman, 2). That is, the real experience of being unwillingly transported to a death camp and denied all

associations with humanity, an experience which a living God would, according to Judaism, if not prevent them at least use to impart some religious growth.

The problem of faith only continues its increase in significance as the balance of goodness and mercy disappears, as it does for Wiesel's narrator in the camps. To him, a God who can allow suffering of such inhuman magnitude cannot be a God at all. He asks, "would this be just a nightmare? An unimaginable nightmare?" (31). Reality itself cannot support the horrors, the "flames in the darkness" (28), the beating of mad Mrs. Schäcter, the "small faces of children whose bodies [he] saw transformed into smoke" (34). In fact, the impossible but true reality of the camps created the absurd, or "the breakdown of the accustomed order in God's world, the dissolution of a long established relationship between man and God. The reality in the concentration camp is cruelty and inhumanity around him. A God who allows such horrors to occur, the young narrator reasons, cannot be worthy of worship, and allowing such destruction to be inflicted upon His people reflects a break in the ancient promise between God and the Jews. The understanding God would provide both spiritual and physical protection for his people in return for their adherence to His will. In the camp, men recite the Kaddish, keeping their half of the promise. This is a devastating blow at the very foundations of Judaism and leaves the theologically serious Jew isolated, to struggle in an unaccustomed loneliness with an indifferent, or worse, hostile universe. Now the narrator loses the comfort of both his community and his God, even his ability to believe in God at all; "after Auschwitz, he is joined to the French existentialists in being confronted with the absurdity engendered and given substance by the Holocaust [...] the only possible response that remains [...] is the denunciation of God" (Knopp, 213). Indeed, within days of his arrival at Buchenwald we see the narrator's identification as an observant Jew begin to unravel. One

particular passage exemplifies this dissolution of his understanding of his religion.

Early on in the text, the narrator vows:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me of all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.

Never. (34)

This citation represents the dissolution of the narrator's ideological identification with his God. The two driving forces are the fire consuming the corpses, and God's apparent silence. The "flames," "smoke," and "bodies," of the crematorium create an insurmountable schism in his ideological understanding of God. They "consume [his] faith forever." They take the rest of his life, his ability to relate to his God and his ability to relate to other Jews as well and "transform [it] into smoke" like the bodies of the murdered children.

Wiesel "cries out against the destruction of European Jewry, against God's failure to save His people, but receives no answer and no divine intervention. Where once there existed a clear connection between the world, Wiesel, and God, the

crematorium and the torture, murder, subjugation, dehumanization and horror of the Holocaust that it represents have overwhelmed and dominated his perception of both the world and his faith. His very sense of self warps along with this ideological disassociation from God. He "[becomes] a different person. The student of Torah, the child [he] was, [is] consumed by the flames... [his] soul [is] invaded-and devoured-by a black flame" (36). Like God, Wiesel offers no justification to his readers. His text becomes a pageant of his experience, complete with confused anger and silence.

Wiesel's experiences in the concentration camp so darkens his understanding of the nature of God, who, apparently refuses to step in and rescue or imbue theological significance. God becomes silent in the face of difficulties for the Jewish community, neither saving His people nor lessening their suffering. Wiesel's ideological separation from his understanding of God does, as Knopp suggests, appear existential in Jewish community later. The problem is that of adjustment. The narrator is a Jew, and God's silence does not give him the responsibility of creating meaning. It signifies the end of meaning.

In fact, the concept of God as a helpless being becomes a noteworthy component of Wiesel's portrayal of his devastated ability to preserve his Jewish self. In one particularly wrenching scene at Buchenwald, Wiesel and his fellow prisoners witness the execution of a young boy accused of sabotaging a Nazi power plant. Wiesel describes the young boy as having "the face of an angel in distress" (63). Rather than abuse his power as servant to the overseer of the plant, the boy is "beloved by all" (63). His innocence does not provide salvation, though. Before his execution he remains in solitary confinement, endures torture, "remain[s] silent" and is led out in chains (64). "Where is merciful God, where is He?" (65), asks one prisoner as the Nazis prepare to hang the boy and two other saboteurs. Forced to walk

past the fresh corpses still hanging, Wiesel "[hears] the same man asking: 'for God's sake, where is God?' and from [within himself, he hears] a voice answer: 'where is He? This is where hanging here from this gallows'" (65). The boy's execution symbolizes the death of humanity and God in the young narrator's eyes. The purity and innocence in the face of all the surrounding human shamefulness and torment falls victim. The black smoke of the Holocaust once again obscures his sight. If his Nazi tormentors can leave a young boy "for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before [the camp's] eyes... his tongue still red, his eyes not yet extinguished" (65) and God must be dead. A living God could not permit such atrocities, could He? The question stands, the problem of theodicy tearing through Wiesel's faith when his surroundings echo only the most horrible aspects of mankind, God's image on earth. The problem of how a God who is supposedly good, can allow such evil to happen surfaces time and again throughout the text. He also includes and distances himself from the blind fumbling of his religious counterparts, the other Jews in the camp. Other people's ability to still identify with their God becomes the battering ram to the relief of Wiesel's besieged and quickly crumbling faith. Others' recitation of the Kaddish, a motif throughout *Night*, never fails to evoke Wiesel's anger at God for allowing the Holocaust to happen. The first time the prisoners say "Kaddish," the Jewish prayer meant to affirm faith in God despite loss, death, and painful earthly circumstances, Wiesel responds with silent anger. "Why should I sanctify His name?" he asks, "The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent" (33). Months later, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Wiesel once again refuses to speak praises to God's name or affirmations of faith. "What are You, my God?" he demands internally, "Master of the Universe, in the face of all this cowardice, this decay, and misery? Why do you go on troubling these poor people's

wounded minds, their ailing bodies?" (66). This memory and knowledge from the past haunts and traumatizes the narrator. From the perspective of whatsoever institution trauma gets represented, the act reproduces the collective memory so that trauma takes its shape in the public discourse. Through this 'trauma process' the collective memory and identity are affected and even do get modified.

Taking up the issue of representation of memory, Avishai Margalit, in his book *The Ethics of Memory*, argues that memory is 'knowledge from the past' not necessarily 'knowledge about the past'. In this sense, representation of memory is always ethical but not necessarily moral. He distinguishes between ethics and morality with references to thick and thin human relations. He states that:

The drift of this idea [...] obviously hinges on the distinction between ethics and morality. In my account, this in turns is based on a distinction between two types of human relations; thick ones and thin ones. Thick relations are grounded in attributes such as parent, friend, lover, fellow-countryman. Thick relations are anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory. (7)

From this perspective the orientation of memory representation is most of the times guided by 'thick relations' but in the time memory is reproduced for the sake of humanity, 'thin relations' are taken into account. Though reproduction of memory gives knowledge 'from the past' not 'about the past', it can tilt towards morality if it rises above personal and familial moorings. In the last sentence of the citation above, Margalit hints at the fact that certain 'shared memory' which is gender specific can also be morally justifiable.

According to Margalit, shared memory in a modern society "travels from person to person through institutions such as archives, and through communal

mnemonic devices, such as monuments and the names of streets" (54). This implies that tradition and history do take the form of shared memory and furthermore collective experiences can strengthen that shared memory. The kind of collective memory and its representation under question in this research is significantly shared by those who are 'related' to others in terms of race and gender.

Nazis torment people. Fellow prisoners steal from and beat his dying father. Wiesel himself turns his back on the suffering. He becomes so selfish that he does care for his father. He becomes concerned only for himself, reflecting for thick relation. God, he feels, does nothing, so he fills with anger and "every fiber in [him] rebels" (67) upon hearing his fellow prisoners praise God in unison. He calls himself "an observer, a stranger" (68) when watching others pray. He begins to see himself as "alone, terribly alone in a world without God" (68). Refusing to fast on Rosh Hashanah, he turns eating "into a symbol of rebellion, of protest against Him" (68). This unaccustomed loneliness leads to the what can be termed death of the narrator's religious identity as "one of God's elect [who] from the time when his conscience first awoke, had lived only for God and had been reared on the Talmud, aspiring to initiation into the Kabala, dedicated to the Eternal" (Seidman, 10). His new understanding of God as one who "[causes] thousands of children to burn in His mass graves... [keeps] six crematoria working day and night... [chooses the prisoners] among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as [their] fathers, mothers, [and] brothers end up in the furnaces" (67) and those who still believe in Him as strangers and outsiders shatters the narrator's own religious understanding of himself. He experiences a death of self-definition, becoming not only an emaciated almost-corpse of a human being, but also an ideological corpse losing his socio-cultural identity as well. Upon looking at his own face in the mirror, the narrator feels he sees



a dead man. As Seidman writes, "precisely because the image of the corpse in the mirror is so unfamiliar, so unassimilable to the living consciousness of the survivor, that image must live on; the survivor will always be, in some sense, a corpse" (3). The death of the narrator's past religious self stretches out through time. Physically, he lives, but ideologically, his faith and his religious identity are as changed as a living body that has become a corpse. Thus, *Night* evokes cultural trauma due to the loss of individual religious identity, perpetuated by the horrors of the Holocaust prison experience.

Wiesel in *Night* is literally imprisoned in Buchenwald. Ultimately, *Night* tracks Wiesel's unraveling religious identity as he progresses from devout Kabbalism to virtually nonexistent faith in and potent anger towards God. It addresses the Holocaust's destructive impact on the most vital forms of human identification. The best way to understand the Holocaust's destructive and, in some cases, fatal impact on these forms of self-definition is to approach them at different points in time. In this case, we have a man's social, cultural and religious identity in crisis at the crucible of his suffering, Buchenwald, and man's relationship with other people and identification with society in religious crisis in the aftermath.

The Holocaust is thus understood as a basic assault upon the integrity of self, cultural, social and religious identity and humanity itself for that matter. The camps were not simply places of imprisonment and execution for those unfortunate enough to be condemned to them, but closed realities, independent from the rational laws and logic of outside world. They served as stages whereon victims saw their own humanity slowly stripped away in a kind of theatrical mimicry and perversion of the ordered and civilized world from which they had been severed.

While Wiesel raises questions relative to the cultural and religious impact of this destruction, Levi's concern is about thin relation of humanity as he is concerned about the welfare of whole humanity, reflecting thin relation of morality as described by Margalit. Although the "ethnic cleansing" perpetuated during the Holocaust particularly targeted the Jews, the Holocaust's effect on his identity took the form of a deeply altered understanding of humanity as a socio-cultural being. In *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi documents and analyzes his memoir of his eleven-month imprisonment at Buna, an auxiliary to Auschwitz. In *If This is A Man* Levi focuses less on the survival of the body and physical self than on the survival of the sense of self and humanity. As Margalit notes, "Thin relations, on the other hand, are backed by the attribute of being human. Thin relations rely also on some aspects of being human, such as being a woman or being sick" (7).

The text *If This is A Man* explores the processes by which the Nazis strove to deprive prisoners of their humanity and in *If This is A Man* Levi documents the Nazis' systematic destruction of their victims' humanity and the similarly systematic methods he and his fellow prisoners employed in attempted defense of their humanity. Both the content and construction of *If This is A Man* convey Levi's experience of the dehumanizing camps in a fashion recreates through testimony the past Holocaust experience around the present experience of reading the text. recreates some of those methodical processes.

From the first pages of *If This is A Man*, Levi describes the environment of the camps, where human law and natural law have been destroyed and humanity itself has become a privilege. He documents his removal from society to the alternative world of Buna in apocalyptic terms. Foreshadowing the impending forced transition from human to inhuman, he calls his last night before the camp "such a night that one knew

that human eyes would not witness it and survive" (10). Here, Levi's concern is about the whole fellow human being rather than the worry of his own near and dear ones. Once inside, he records a dawn that "came on [him and the other prisoners] like a betrayer; it seemed as though the new sun rose as an ally of [their] enemies to assist in [their] destruction" (12). His language evokes the unnaturalness of his experience. Indeed, Levi later recalls the Nazis' perversion and manipulation of the natural world intended to facilitate dehumanization; "the outside door opens, a freezing wind enters and we are naked and cover ourselves up with our arms. The wind blows and slams the door; the German reopens it and stands watching with interest how we writhe to hide from the wind, one behind the other" (19). The elements themselves seem to work for their captors, reinforcing the illusion that Levi and the others have been transported to some negative reality, where "around [them], everything is hostile. Above [them] the malevolent clouds chase each other to separate [them] from the sun" (37) and they are powerless to stop or even understand their sudden transition from a world in which they are human beings and citizens to a world in which their humanity loses its value at the hands of the Nazi guards.

In order to emphasize the unnaturalness of the camp environment Levi also compares it to the outside civilization to which he and his fellow prisoners once belonged, a world which still exists and in which the social structure remains unchanged and unaffected, except for the erasure of Levi and his companions. He writes:

For people condemned to death, tradition prescribes an austere ceremony, calculated to emphasize that all passions and anger have died down, and that the act of justice represents only a sad duty towards society which moves even the executioner to pity for the

victim. Thus the condemned man is shielded from all external cares, he is granted solitude and, should he want it, spiritual comfort; in short, care is taken that he should feel around him neither hatred nor arbitrariness, only necessity and justice, and by means of punishment, pardon. (10)

This passage's characterization of the nature of civilized execution plainly contrasts with the purpose of the camps. There, prisoners are condemned to death without the security of tradition or ceremony, are denied spiritual comfort and worst of all they die with the knowledge that justice does not demand or give meaning to their deaths. Their separation from the traditions and social values of the outside world increases the prisoners' suffering and dehumanization. As Jonathan Druker observes, "in Auschwitz, life [becomes] all the more unlivable because death has lost its meaning" (160). Removing victims from their familiar social structure is only one half of the fact, as the camps actually act as threat to the civilized society to which the prisoners belonged, a precise and functional man-made hell. Shaken into a world whose order and structure is entirely opposite to the outside world, the prisoners face the prospect of a dehumanized death, in which their executioners don't see them as men but as items, "a hundred miserable and sordid puppets [...] transformed into the phantoms (22). Levi's judgment of execution explains elaborate process of dehumanization for which the Nazis created the camps.

By isolating their prisoners in the camps, the Nazis deprive them of their basic human rights and facilities. Upon the prisoners' entrance to the camp, a German orders Levi and his fellow Italians to undress,

put [their] shoes in a certain corner, and [...] someone comes with a broom and sweeps away all the shoes, outside the door in a heap. He is

crazy, he is mixing them all together, ninety-six pairs, they will be all mixed up. (19)

The chaos of the shoes, however, illustrates a deliberate infliction of meaningless confusion and vexation, necessary to the camp's purpose. The camp's function is to diminish the prisoners' humanity by denying their capacity for understanding.

Throughout Levi's experience at Buna, the guards maintain the environment of fear of and confusion. In one instance, "shouting people throw at [the prisoners] unrecognizable rags and thrust into [their] hands a pair of broken-down boots with wooden soles; [they] have no time to understand and they already find [them]selves in the open, in the blue and icy snow of dawn, barefoot and naked" (22) and in another, Levi recounts the nonsense demands placed upon the prisoners on a daily basis. He documents the senseless trivial chores required of each prisoners and blockhouse:

The rites to be carried out were infinite and senseless: every morning one had to make the "bed" perfectly flat and smooth; smear one's muddy and repellent wooden shoes with the appropriate machine grease; scrape the mudstains off one's clothes (paint, grease and rust-stains were, however, permitted); in the evening one had to undergo the control for lice and the control of washing one's feet; on Saturday, have one's beard and hair shaved, mend or have mended one's rags; on Sunday, undergo the general control for skin diseases and the control of buttons on one's jacket, which had to be five. (29)

Placing militaristic demands on their victims, the Nazis create an authoritative environment in which every aspect of daily activity, right down to the number of jacket buttons, falls into their rigid control. These above listed requirements suggest an effort to create order for the prisoners, but considering their impossibility The

mud-free clothes after a day of working in the mud, finding buttons or machine grease to make ones clothing presentable, making the bed immaculately can be understood as daily reinforcements of the prisoners dehumanized, property-like, mechanized role in the camps, intended to make "exile, life and death seem one single reality. The camp's success in this endeavor cannot be questioned. Levi watches "squads of [his] comrades appear, returning from work. They walk in columns of five with a strange, unnatural hard gait, like stiff puppets made of jointless bones; but they walk scrupulously in time to the band" (25). They lose themselves to the rigid regulations of the Nazis and become "puppets" made from human bodies. Their "unnatural hard gait," however, points to the fact that their environment and the regulations imposed upon them are deviations.

The structure of camp life both creates an environment in which the Nazis can most effectively strip away their victims' [Jewish] humanity and provides a framework for this assault. If we see Levi's account of roll-call: "with the absurd precision to which we later had to accustom ourselves, the Germans held the roll-call. At the end the officer asked 'Wieviel Stück?' The corporal saluted smartly and replied that there were six hundred and fifty "pieces" and that all was in order" (12). This episode linguistically transforms the prisoners from people into "pieces" with the value of inanimate objects. Later, too, Levi asks a guard why he may not satisfy his thirst by sucking on an icicle and is told " 'Hier ist kein warum' (there is no why here)" (25). Levi comments, "the explanation is repugnant but simple: in [the camp] everything is forbidden, not for hidden reasons, but because the camp has been created for that purpose" (25). Where Wiesel looked to God for meaning in his suffering, Levi recognizes that the meaninglessness of camp life is an intentional assault on the Jewish prisoners and that the arbitrary rules and cruel regulations were

designed to inflict upon prisoners a loss of self through reduction to the anonymous masses, reduction to silence, and removal from the human condition. Like the Nazis' deliberate decisions to mix up everyone's shoes, arbitrarily let cold wind blow in on the naked prisoners, and demand nearly impossible levels of conformity and cleanliness in physical daily life, the decision to deprive the prisoners of and all reasons of deprivation, like that of warmth, or food, or water is a powerfully dehumanizing act. It forces them to the same intellectual awareness as animals and reinforces the Nazis' desire for absolute control over their prisoners' lives.

While Levi's narrative provides concrete examples of the Nazi process of dehumanization, the actual structure of his text recreates the theatrical nature of the inhuman world of the camps for the Jewish community. *If This is A Man* falls into the memoir category, but is structurally reminiscent of a play with "each chapter structured as a kind of vignette [or scene] crystallizing one or a group of elements in both the dismantling of personality and its reconstruction" (Sachs, 759).

For identifying and establishing the traumatic meaning of cultural trauma, it is necessary for people to find out a shared ground of trauma because a sense of community is intrinsically imbedded in it. The principles of cultural trauma are similar to what one of the African proverbs says: 'A person is only a person among persons'. Theorists of cultural trauma see an individual's identity as inextricably connected to the rest of the community, so if an individual gets traumatized because of a certain trauma, the 'mind' of the community can experience its effects and thereby find a remedy. These two poles of connectivity and individuality are brought together by cultural trauma.

The notion of cultural trauma, then, entails the relationship between an individual's remembrance of the traumatic event and a shared memory of a group or

community to which he/she belongs. An individual's cultural identity is negotiated within this collectively shared past of the community. Thus, even though there may be a unique individual memory to draw upon, it should be seen as always embedded in a collective history. "This collectively memory provides the individual with a cognitive map within to orient present behavior" (Eyerman 6). And because the group memory or identity gets solidified and comes to self awareness through continuous individual reflection upon and recreation of a memory, this process is a social necessity; neither an individual nor a cultural can do without it.

During a journey through Russia on his long trip home, he and his companions lit fires in the woods, sang and danced deep into the night. Part of this narrator's appeal is that he's given to great leaps of hope for "an upright and just world, miraculously re-established on its natural foundations after an eternity of upheavals, of errors and massacres, after our long patient wait. It was a naïve hope ... but it was on this that we were living" (141). It's clear that this time cut out of Levi's life in Turin contained not only the deepest horror, but the defining experiences of his life. This causes him cultural trauma as he finds himself at odds with his community.

*If This Is A Man* is literally about survival because it reminds the narrator of his identity before Auschwitz. Levi's reference to "culture" can be reframed as a reference to the quest for symbolic order in society. Levi is able to process the immediate reality of Auschwitz through the "liberating and differentiating" "respite" words because these words give him access to the social codes that define the narrator's life before Auschwitz. The narrator is distraught at not being able to remember the words of this literary link to his identity before the camps. Significantly, *If This Is A Man* which functions as the remainder of the atrocity is about the events that led up to the narrator's physical liberation from Auschwitz. But,



mentally, he is not liberated. Hence, this chapter marks a turning point in the narrator's story. In the chapter entitled *Die Drei Leute vom Labor*, the narrator reflects on the extent to which he has changed as a result of his incarceration at Auschwitz.

...This year has gone by so quickly. This time last year I was a free man: an outlaw but free, I had a name and a family, I had an eager and restless mind, an agile and healthy body. I used to think of many, far-away things: of my work, of the end of the war, of good and evil, of the nature of things and the laws which govern human actions; and also of mountains, of singing and loving, of music, of poetry. I had an enormous, deep-rooted, foolish faith in the benevolence of fate; to kill and to die seemed extraneous literary things to me. My days were both cheerful and sad, but I regretted them equally, they were all full and positive; the future stood before me as a great treasure. Today the only thing left of the life of those days is what one needs to suffer hunger and cold; I am not even alive enough to know how to kill myself. (168-69)

This passage apparently sums up the shattering of the narrator's subjectivity through the dismantling of everything he once knew. This passage is haunting because it laments the extent to which people were destroyed at a psychological level as a result of this holocaust trauma. In a matter of a year, the author has lost his identity as well as his sense of belongingness in his community. In this passage it is clear that the narrator's entire life has been obliterated, "Today the only thing left of the life of those days is what one needs to suffer hunger and cold; I am not even alive enough to know how to kill myself". He does not even possess the strength or the passion to

consider an end to his existence. The narrator only feels enough to suffer what is basic: hunger and cold. This passage aptly sums up the deconstruction of subjectivity leading to the difficulty in socio-cultural adjustment.

Levi records the Holocaust experiences of his fellow prisoners, often speaking for all of them collectively, and undoes their isolation by making them a part of a common experience. His memoir brings that experience to present generations. Levi omits his emotional reaction from the text; his memoir retains its power as a means of creating a common ground so that those readers who have not experienced the devastation of the Holocaust can provide some kind of reaction of their own. *If This is A Man*, in its documentation of the Nazis' methods of dehumanization and their prisoners' attempts to preserve their humanity, remains as open-ended as the sentence unfinished in the title. Levi's stylistic restraint and the episodes he recreates ask readers to finish that sentence, and thus secure his once-threatened humanity by connecting it to that of every person who engages with his memoir.

In the months which followed his return from Auschwitz, Primo Levi wrote an account of his experience in the concentration camp, driven by the "immediate and violent impulse" (p. 15) to "bear witness" (p. 47) and give a true account of events both for himself and for those who never returned.

Each prisoner is alone; their previous identity becomes meaningless and only a small minority can refer back to group membership. Interpersonal relationships of considerable depth survive, but few are lucky enough to have the opportunity or the ability to form them. The others know only "the struggle for life . . . reduced to its primordial mechanism" (94), interwoven with strategies for individual social mobility in which only the attest have a real chance of survival. These are usually the worst in human terms capable of exploiting their fellow-prisoners even to their death.

Camp life takes place inside watertight compartments. No change of category is possible. The groups were impermeable aggregates, marked by 'caste barriers' (126). The loss of the human condition and its reappearance with the oppressors' withdrawal are shown by the disappearance and re-emergence of group ties. The group of unlucky travelling companions, which is a reference point and source of support during the journey to Auschwitz, is deliberately broken up by the Germans on their arrival at the camp. Any attempt to preserve those ties soon fails in the face of the atrocity of the situation: "We Italians had decided to meet every Sunday evening in a corner of the Lager, but we stopped it at once, because it was too sad to count our numbers and fewer each time, and to see each other ever more deformed and more squalid. And it was so tiring to walk those few steps and then, meeting each other, to remember and to think. It was better not to think" (43). But when there is a glimpse of a chance of revival, a small group forms again to unite the effort to tackle an emergency and defend its tiny resources against the faceless multitude of the desperate prisoners. After the Germans' withdrawal, a united group is formed in the clinic occupied by Levi and ten other patients; forgotten acts which herald renewed interest in others reappear along with the desire to know others' experiences demotions and the determination no longer to use others as a mere instrument for one's own survival. In Levi's account, the group, or rather the small group is the basic molecule for social life. Its disappearance indicates the breakdown of every component of civilized life; its reappearance shows the laborious attempt to reconstitute the ties of solidarity.

In the text, strong emphasis is placed on the "demolition of a man" (32), in other words, on the process of dehumanization which reduces individuals to 'dead men' (57), 'non-men who march and labour in silence' (96), 'in whose eyes not a trace

of a thought is to be seen' (96) whom 'one hesitates to call . . . living: one hesitates to call their death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand' (96), because 'the experience of someone who has lived for days during which man was merely a thing, in the eyes of man is non-human' (178).

The stages of dehumanization are marked by being physically stripped, the elimination of one's name, the tattoo on one's left arm, the cancellation of normal human relations. In this process, speech the basic feature which distinguishes man from the animals is eliminated. The language of Auschwitz is the 'Lagerjargon', a rough, primitive slang, shouted more than talked, punctuated constantly with shoves, and derived from the contamination of various different languages. 'The work of bestial degradation' (177) carried out by the Germans is described from the point of view of the oppressed group, whose more perceptive members realize that the Lager is 'a great machine to reduce us to beasts' (47), as Sergeant Steinlauf informed Levi on the latter's arrival at the camp. The text contains a great deal of animal imagery. The prisoners are compared to 'tired beasts' (50), 'ants' (68), as sheep hiding in the corners to protect themselves. The prisoners have 'the opaque torpor of beasts broken in by blows' (124); they constitute a 'silent, innumerable cock' (125), 'an abject cock' (155) re-echoing with different tongues which to the civilians sound as 'grotesque as animal noises' (127). The most exhausted prisoners remind Levi of 'sledge-dogs in London's books, who slave until the last breath and die on the track' (49); they are 'nothing more than an involucre, like the slough of certain insects one ends on the banks of swamps, held by a thread to the stones and shaken by the wind' (48). The toughest prisoners, on the other hand, have 'the rudimentary astuteness of a draught-horse, which stops pulling a little before it reaches exhaustion' (48); as such, they are beaten 'almost lovingly' by the better Kapos and the blows are accompanied by

'exhortations, as cart-drivers do with willing horses' (73). The prisoner who is able to 'arrange' matters and alternative means of support for himself and his Kommando is likened to 'a bloodhound' who 'has an astonishing nose for the soup of civilians, like bees for Towers' (81), or an 'ichneumon' which 'paralyzes the great hairy caterpillar, wounding it in its only vulnerable ganglion' (105). The prisoners' way of eating, 'on our feet, furiously, burning our mouths and throats, without time to breathe, really is fressen, the way of eating of animals, and certainly not essen, the human way of eating, seated in front of a table, religiously' (82). The word fressen is the one most frequently used in Auschwitz. Again, in the description of 'the human type most suited' for camp life, the dwarf Elias, there are constant animal allusions ('bestial vigour', 'climbs like a monkey', possesses 'the deceitful bestiality' and 'the instinctive astuteness of wild animals' (101-104). It is no coincidence that Levi wonders whether Elias is 'a madman, incomprehensible and para-human' or 'an atavism, different from our modern world, and better adapted to the primordial conditions of camp life' (103), using categories far removed from the human condition we consider normal.

The ultimate stage of dehumanization is epitomized by the gure of Null Achtzehn (Zero Eighteen), to whom everything is so indifferent that he works without 'troubling to avoid tiredness and blows or to search for food' (49). 'He carries out all the orders that he is given and it is foreseeable that when they send him to his death he will go with the same total indifference' (49). At the collective level, it is expressed by the image of the prisoners marching in the morning: 'They are ten thousand and they are a single grey machine; they are exactly determined; they do not think and they do not desire, they walk' (57).

In this way, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi's works narrativize the effects of trauma on individual and collective identities that is well documented in non-fiction. *If This is a Man*, along with Elie Wiesel's *Night* is considered to be of the most influential accounts of Holocaust survival. These writers' ability to fictionalize his and others' Holocaust experiences in novel form offers unique insight into the human condition and the question of identity after trauma.

## V. Affirmation of Cultural Trauma of Levi and Wiesel

The analysis of Levi's *If This is a Man* and Elie Wiesel's *Night* shows that the act of memorialization becomes a recovery of the damaged past self. They write about their personal experiences of an event of global proportions creating a monument to the memory of a lost aspect of the self and, in doing so, perpetuates the recovery and reclamation of personhood. Through their unflinching memoirs, Levi and Wiesel confront the Holocaust experience and its relevance to the present and the future. In the confrontation and exploration of the damage done to their sense of self, each author leaves a literary marker of defiance. Each of these authors' necessary exploration of the destroyed aspects of identity, of the "damage that was done," reinforces the lasting aspects of their subjectivity. As a result, they lose a sense of belongingness in their community as they find it difficult to cope with social, cultural and religious belief after the Holocaust survival.

Wiesel's description of his struggle with his religious identity in the face of God's passivity and silence and religion's institutional failure shows that the survivor's socio-cultural and religious understanding has been shattered making him traumatized in the remaining life. *Night* unfolds labyrinths of theodicy, the seeming silence of God in the face of human suffering, and religion's ultimate impotence as a communal force in the social reintegration of victims. Through his narrator's similar struggles with the beliefs in the light of the meaningless suffering and death each witnessed in the Holocaust, Wiesel draws the picture of a religious identity that has been displaced. His understanding of God, and thus of the role of religion in his life and the core of his identity, develop in what critics call an ant "i-bildungsroman" style throughout *Night*, following a pattern of defeat and silence rather than maturation and expansion.

The study explores the ways how the destroyed belief inhibits the survivor, preventing him from developing a distinct new religious identity and belongingness in religious community. Despite the frustrating outlook for his narrator, Wiesel himself takes a revolutionary step by breaking the silence that so profoundly affected his faith. Instead of abandoning the idea of God or religion, Wiesel protests. He documents the grave changes in his faith, perhaps to show that such a faith persists despite every strike against it.

In *If This is A Man* Levi writes in a poetic style that exemplifies his cultural awareness of the Holocaust experiences. He retells his own story he secures the perpetuation of his intellectual role in the world by recreating his experience in the minds of those who engage with the text. *If This is A Man*, invites the reader in with concise, often emotionless narrative. Levi writes in an attempt to share his Holocaust experience, both as a story and as literary experience that forces the reader into some of the same psychological spaces through which Levi himself passed. Levi the author shares a portion of his experience with us, the readers, and so creates a cyclic passage of humanity from which Levi's role and significance cannot be removed. The Nazis sought to destroy Primo Levi, but Levi, by writing his memoir, turned their dehumanizing processes upside down, showing himself to be more human, more cultured, and more of an intellectual presence than those who tried to destroy him.

The analysis of *If This Is A Man* shows the impact of holocaust trauma on the survivor's psyche. The study indicates that the traumatic experience affects the psyche at a fundamental level. The narrator of *If This Is A Man* describes his descent into what he calls "The Bottom". In my analysis of this narrative it can be seen that the systematic dismantling of social and moral codes during the Holocaust indicates the destabilization of the socio-cultural order and that this extreme subversion reflects



in the trauma experience by the Written-I. The narrator calls this radical deconstruction of the written-I within this disruptive space “the demolition of man”. This “demolition” is indicative of the fact that the atrocities committed within the Nazi Death camps, were of such an ineffable nature that it destabilized the socio-cultural order. The Lagers were a disruptive space that – in a cruel, systemized way – destabilized the narrator’s sense of self and belongingness in society.

In the analyses of both these texts, it became clear that the creation of meaning and coherence from the atrocities of the Holocaust forms a central motif. In fact, in both texts the narrator makes mention of the need to understand his traumatic incarceration at Auschwitz. In the course of this study, I have shown that this consistent need to re-visit the memory of this traumatic space and create an understanding of that space is indicative of the psychologically repetitive nature of trauma.

Holocaust in Europe was the devastating and deadly event to erase the human existence and humanity of the Jews of the European countries. By their autobiographical narratives the writers try to psychologically evacuate themselves. The motif behind of these narratives is to make the next generation of Jews community know the atrocities of Holocaust and systematic, institutional criminal activities of Nazi soldiers. To displace Jews from their birth places and homelands and to confiscate their familial and personal properties was simply a barbaric and criminal act.

Human civilization was threatened in different periods of human history. There are so many other incidents of mass human killing taken place in the world after the Holocaust. There was the threat to existence of certain caste, ethnicity and religiosity of certain groups. They were targeted to make them inhuman, to suffer

from severe communal, religious and psychological loss. Mass killing of Hutut and Tutsi tribes in Ruwanda, Siya and Sunny Muslim riots in Iraq, Hindu Muslim riot in Gujarat in India etc are the examples of mass killings of humans. The researcher has commemorated the event of having the familial property being seized and being forced to be displaced by the so called rebellious group during a ten year Maoists insurgency. The personal experience of the researcher is felt to be similar to the inhuman events of world history in certain level. Displacing people simply because of their birth lineage, belief in certain political domain, these narratives and expression of these experiences help to try to reduce those traumatic memories and appeal to have uniformity among the eye witnesses who were victimized on different phases of human history. It is furthermore appealing to form a universal community.

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