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## Holocaust Memory and Holocaust History in the work of Saul Friedländer

De verhouding tussen herinnering en geschiedschrijving staat centraal in dit supplementsartikel van Robert Eaglestone. Hij bekijkt hoe ze zich verhouden in het werk van Saul Friedländer.

It is often assumed that 'memory' and 'history' have an antagonistic relationship. For many historians, works of memory - testimony, novels, film and so on - are often understood to be personal, subjective, interior, unreliable and unable to offer proof for their assertions. Some historians go so far as to say that memory is 'a misleading new name' for 'myth'.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, a work of history is understood to be communal, not least because historical works are analysed and in a sense vetted by the community of historical scholars, and to be able to offer proof for its claims, usually through meta-textual evidence (mainly archives and documents). For other sorts of readers, history is often thought to be 'dry as dust' and unable to get to the 'core' of events, while 'memory' texts describe what happened in a more 'real' way. However, I want to suggest that this opposition is misplaced. Clearly these two modes are different, but I aim to show that not only are they complementary, but also that history relies on the phenomena of memory, properly understood.

Indeed, it is the proper understanding of memory that turns this antagonism into a productive tension: as Gadamer wrote, it 'is time to rescue the phenomenon of memory from being regarded merely as a psychological faculty [or, one might add, as a faulty and unreliable archive] and to see it as an essential element of the finite historical being of man'.<sup>2</sup> Memory is central to who we are and what makes us who we are. This understanding of memory - as part of our existential being rather than simply a storehouse

1 Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, 'Collective memory - what is it?', *History and Memory* 8: 1 (1996) 30-50, aldaar 47.

2 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method* (London 1989) 20.

of words and images to be called on - changes how we see the interaction of history and memory. In Holocaust history, the place where this debate has emerged most importantly, perhaps, I suggest that this issue can be seen clearly through the work of Saul Friedländer. Not only is Friedländer one of the most significant historians of the Holocaust but he has also been one of the most significant thinkers about the Holocaust, meditating on issues such as the relationship memory and history, representation and Holocaust and the 'logic' and presentation of Nazism. By looking at how his thinking about the past and his practice of writing history has developed, it is possible to see more clearly how memory and history interact.

### From history to memory...

Friedländer's early work as a historian displays a model Rankean rigour. His *Pius XII and the Third Reich* aims 'to adhere, as far as possible, to the documents' not least because only 'quotation of the document in extension permits the reader to evaluate its scope and real shades of meaning'.<sup>3</sup> His work on the US and the Third Reich is based on a 'thorough study of the documents' and judges the influence of the US on Hitler's policies 'strictly from the standpoint of political and military logic'.<sup>4</sup> Even his book on Kurt Gerstein, *The counterfeit Nazi: the ambiguity of good* - it is in some way a response to Arendt on Eichmann - has only a page and a half at the end which could, strictly, be seen as 'speculation' rather than documentary history and even that aims to elucidate why Gerstein's fate was unique.

However, a watershed for his work was the 'necessary undertaking' of his 1978 memoir, *Quand vient le souvenir...* (the significant ellipses are missing in the English translation, *When memory comes*).<sup>5</sup> This 'incessant confrontation with the past' begins a turn in his work away from 'documentary history' traditionally understood (that is, a conception of history as a judgement producing truth as correspondence to the past) to a different understanding of the sort of truth to which writing history aspires, one which discloses the existential work of memory.<sup>6</sup>

Friedländer's memoir is an engagement between what can be known

3 Saul Friedländer, *Pius XII and the Third Reich* (London 1966) xv.

4 Saul Friedländer, *Prelude to downfall: Hitler and the United States* (London 1967) vii, 310.

5 Saul Friedländer, *When memory comes* (New York 1980) 182.

6 Friedländer, *When memory comes*, 182.



Prothesen van in Auschwitz vermoorde Joden. Uit: Teresa Swiebocka ed., *Auschwitz. A history in photographs* (Warsaw 1990) 210.

(proved, verified objectively, true corresponding to an object) and what is remembered (how the world is disclosed) and the effects of this memory in, among other things, the formation of personal and communal identity. Its leitmotif and epigram (in the French edition) is taken from the writer Gustav Meyrink: 'When knowledge comes, memory comes too, little by little. Knowledge and memory are the same thing'. However, significantly, for Friedländer, the sequence was inverted: 'when memory comes, knowledge comes too'.<sup>7</sup> The story of his survival during the Holocaust, and the effects that this survival can, in a sense, be charted from the changes in his name from Pavel (in Prague) to Paul (in France) to Paul-Henri (in hiding) to Shaul (in Israel) and finally to Saul. Coming from a very assimilated German Jewish family in Prague ('everyone in our house felt German'), his family fled to France, but did not manage to escape the Nazis.<sup>8</sup> At his parents request, he was hidden in a Catholic school. He was baptised and 'became someone else: Paul-Henri Ferland, an unequivocally Catholic name'.<sup>9</sup> More than this, the 'first ten years of my life, the memories of my childhood' had to disappear 'for there was no possible synthesis between the person I had been and the person I was to become'.<sup>10</sup> He remained hidden during the

7 Ibidem, 20, 182.

8 Ibidem, 4.

9 Ibidem, 79.

10 Ibidem, 80.

war. His reclamation of his Jewish identity began after the war. Discussing his possible vocation in the Catholic church, a priest, Father L., tells him about Auschwitz. In his memoir, he mediates over what it was that drew him towards this identity. From an assimilated family, he had no deep memories of his Jewishness. 'What secret work was accomplished within me during this trip?' he writes, 'what instinct, buried beneath acquired loyalty suddenly caused a profounder loyalty to emerge? An obscure rupture, brought about by the astonishing discovery'.<sup>11</sup> This rupture - of memory - began the long journey of his return to Judaism: he writes that it 'took me a long, long time to find the way back to my own past'.<sup>12</sup> Ten years later, in 1956, he read the work of Martin Buber while staying with an uncle near Stockholm, and this too, made an impression on him. He is reintroduced to Judaism, but not without difficulties.

The memoir is full of tension between memory and history: one reveals his identity, 'how things are for him' and the other makes up 'verifiable' history. As a rigorous historian he uses many, often heartrending, documentary sources (letters, telegrams) yet these do not and cannot explain the crucial and 'obscure rupture' of memory. Memory, and the way in which it is crucial in our sense of who we are and how the world is, runs deeper than conventional historical discourse and is, for Friedländer, this understanding of truth as disclosure. Memory, in his work means more than simply remembering. It isn't just remembering the 'white socks' of the protesting Sudeten Germans in 1938, nor reflecting on the links between past and present (say, the rather frightening associations caused by smell of the 'leather overcoats' of the Czech Border police in 1967).<sup>13</sup> The 'extraordinary mechanism of memory' and what it does, are suggested by the ellipses at the end of the title.<sup>14</sup> The epigraph suggests that one completes the sentence with 'knowledge comes too', according to Friedländer's adapted leitmotif. Yet the fact that this is absent is stressed by the presence of the ellipses. But knowledge doesn't come, or doesn't come necessarily. This leads one to read it as a critique of knowledge which cannot fill or compare with memory: memory underlies both historical knowledge and exceeds it. Memory is tied into identity, both personal and collective, and into the limits of history. Memory is not, or is not only, a way of making

11 Ibidem, 139.

12 Ibidem, 102.

13 Ibidem, 25, 37.

14 Ibidem, 79.

clear all those things that don't fit easily into historical accounts - feelings, senses of identity and so on: it underlies history. Memory is what is central to our understanding of disclosing ourselves to ourselves, when it comes or when it doesn't: it cannot easily be subsumed into the discipline of history which wants facts it can verify by its own criteria precisely because memory in this sense is that on which the discipline history relies - although it often covers this up.

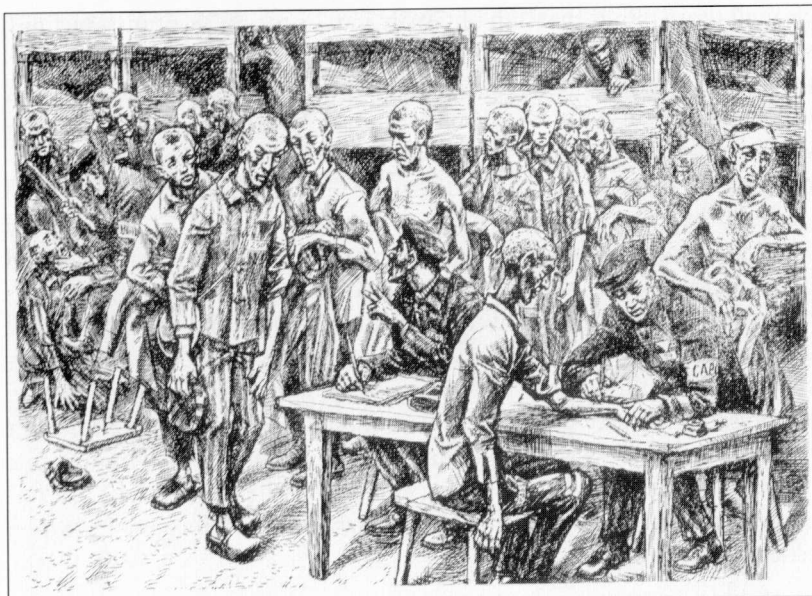
But it is also in this memoir that the counter to this existential ethical understanding of memory emerges. Once this 'unverifiable' truth and its power has been recognised, its overwhelming and mythic power emerges. One of the many places that this comes to the fore, and these two understandings of truth interact, is in a discussion of Joachim Fest's film *Hitler: A Career*. In the text - which leaps around chronologically - Friedländer has just been interviewing a German Grand Admiral, who - framed in a 'narrow halo of light' by the setting sun during their conversation, a poetic image of hypocrisy - denies knowing about the Holocaust.<sup>15</sup> He then reflects on the film:

'For anyone who does not know the facts, the power and the glory still remain... For anyone who does not know the facts, the mystical communion with the brownshirt revolution and its martyrs still remains. Thus is evidence transformed over the years, thus do memories crumble away.'<sup>16</sup>

This stresses both the truth as correspondence version of history - the facts - but at the same time admits the terrible pull of truth as disclosure as 'mystical disclosure', as an unarguable and so pre-rational, world founding myth. The memoir, and his later work, is caught in this stress between two opposed imperatives: first, the recognition of the central and founding power of memory beyond 'scientific' proof as that which founds and underlies the discipline of history and second, for the discipline of history - assertions about the past, generated and judged according to certain criteria - to counter, to hold in check, to alter that which has been disclosed by memory. Only if the discipline of 'history' is understood principally as an ethical practice can this be resolved.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, 146.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, 146-7.



'Tattooing prisoners door Mieczyslaw Kościelniak'. Uit: Teresa Swiebocka ed., *Auschwitz. A history in photographs* (Warsaw 1990) 225.

### ... to 'historical consciousness'

The change in Friedländer's stated historiography and historical practice, announced by his memoir, is clear in his next book *Reflets du Nazisme* (1982). Subtitled 'an essay on Kitsch and death', Friedländer argues that 'any analysis of Nazism based only on political, economic and social interpretation will not suffice'.<sup>17</sup> He aims to trace the 'latent discourse ruled by a profound logic' of the images used by the Nazis and those who write or make films about that period.<sup>18</sup> This is - *pace* Benjamin - to seize the past 'as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised'.<sup>19</sup> These images - from literature, from film - illumine the Nazi past. However, they also illuminate the present, and what Friedländer saw as a 'new discourse' on Nazism in which some 'kind of limit has been overstepped

17 Saul Friedländer, *Reflections on Nazism: an essay on kitsch and death* (Bloomington revised ed. 1993) 13.

18 Friedländer, *Reflections on Nazism*, 15.

19 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', *Illuminations* (London 1999) 247.

and uneasiness appears.<sup>20</sup> This 'new discourse' in 'artistic' representations will find its parallel in historical representation in Friedländer's debate with Martin Brozat, the leading German Holocaust historian of the time. In this work, and those that succeed it, his aim is to let history written in the present critique the past and, at the same time, let the past be disclosed as memory to critique the present, and the present history.

In the introduction to 1993's *Memory, history and the extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Friedländer explores this explicitly. Setting himself against the 'common thesis' of a 'basic opposition between history and memory', he argues that this opposition is less convincing in the case of representation of the recent past or 'a past considered to be of cardinal relevance for the identity of a given group'.<sup>21</sup> He suggests that there is a continuum between, at one end, dispassionate works of history and, at the other, public-collective memory. The middle ground between them he calls 'historical consciousness', which covers those eras that have 'existential' and ideological relevance to the present.<sup>22</sup> As before, memory is not, or is not primarily verifiable by reference to documents, and evidence and so on. Friedländer's 'historical consciousness' reflects the mixture of all these verifiable or unverifiable beliefs and facts that make up communal identity. Although he does not say this explicitly, it is clear that 'historical consciousness' - which makes up shared communal memory and so shared communal identity and thus plays a huge role in the formation of personal identity - in some way (socio-ontologically?<sup>23</sup>) comes before or lies beneath works produced according to a rigorous historiography.

In terms of Holocaust history, he suggests, this is made more acute by the intensity of the unavoidable intermingling of the two. There are many issues - such as the "exceptionality" or comparability' of the Holocaust, the responses of the Judenräte, and the reaction of scholars from different groups to each other (Friedländer suggests that some German scholars think of work by Jewish scholars as commemorative, not as "rational-objective"

20 Friedländer, *Reflections on Nazism* 21.

21 Friedländer, *Memory, History and the extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington 1993) viii.

22 Friedländer, *Memory, History and the extermination of the Jews of Europe*, viii.

23 Socio-ontology would be the study of the way in which societies and communities are, or come into being: c.f. Charles Maier "memory itself becomes not a simple act of recall but a socially constitutive act" Charles Maier, *The unmasterable past* (London 1988) 169.

studies') - which cannot be discussed in a neutral way, or which do not already reflect pre-existing existential, identity, philosophical or historiographical commitments.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, changes in 'collective memory' or how communities see themselves (changes effected by, for example, the unification of Germany or the situation of Israel) in turn effect how history is written.

For Friedländer, as I have suggested, these two ends of the spectrum pose an aporia, an unresolvable problem: 'extricating a "rational-historiography" from the overall field of "history and memory" of this epoch is an ever-necessary, yet an ever elusive goal'.<sup>25</sup> The choice is between an awareness of the 'inadequacy of traditional historiographical testimony and the need to establish as reliable a narration as possible', between an awareness that the existential ethical truth of memory cannot be properly or fully explained and the need to establish a judgement of positivistic historical truth.<sup>26</sup>

He explores this most closely, perhaps, in his essay 'Trauma, Transference and "Working through"'. Beginning with a discussion of the status of memory and Jewish historiography, Friedländer suggests that, in the manifestations of memory (Lanzmann's *Shoah*, Levi's work) 'no redemptive theme or sign of resolution is evident'.<sup>27</sup> He writes that this might lead one to question the work of Cathy Caruth, whose work, following Freud, suggests that it is possible to 'work through' historical trauma. He suggests that much German history of the Holocaust has been characterised by 'defences', beginning with massive denial in the forties and fifties. The student revolts of the sixties, while fighting against 'fascism', understood the Nazi past only in a very indistinct way. Although a new approach began to develop in the sixties and seventies and the 'Historian's debate' (Historiker Streit) of the late eighties foregrounded many of the issues, this forgetting remains very powerful.<sup>28</sup> One defence he names 'splitting off': relegating the Holocaust to the margins of the Third Reich's history, or normalising the events as part of the work of history. He also finds defences and avoidance on the side of the victims. Although 'silence did not exist within the survivor community [...]

24 Friedländer, *Memory, History and the extermination of the Jews of Europe* ix.

25 Ibidem, x.

26 Ibidem, x.

27 Saul Friedländer, 'Trauma, transference and 'Working through' in writing the history of the *Shoah*', *History and Memory* 4 (1992) 39-59, aldaar 43

28 On this, see also Richard Evans, *In Hitler's shadow: West German historians and the attempt to escape from the Nazi past* (London 1989) 113 ev.

It was maintained in relation to the outside world and was often imposed by shame' (this contradicts some of Peter Novick's thesis in *The holocaust and collective memory*).<sup>29</sup> Major Jewish historians did not write histories of the Holocaust and, as is well-known, Raul Hilberg found it difficult to get his groundbreaking history published.<sup>30</sup> Friedländer suggests that current 'historical interpretation by Jewish historians is still caught between hasty ideological closure (such as the "catastrophe and redemption theses") and a paralysis of attempts at global interpretation [...] This evaluation applies also to my own work'.<sup>31</sup>

Having discussed the defences against writing a history of the Holocaust, and having argued that historians should be aware of these defences, he turns to the possibility of 'working through'. For Freud, and for 'trauma theorists', this involves a resolution of the trauma through integration, a 'feeling of familiarity, of being known, of communion [...] the survivor who has achieved commonality with others can rest from her labours'.<sup>32</sup> However, in relation to what remains 'indeterminate, elusive and opaque' - the Holocaust - the historian must reject exactly that sense of integration or closure. Paradoxically, working thorough this material must entail precisely not a working through: 'the imperative of rendering a truthful account as documents and testimonials will allow, without giving in to

29 Saul Friedländer, 'Trauma, transference and 'Working through'', 48.

30 There might be a more nuanced picture, which suggests that the Holocaust was refracted through and in relation to other concerns. While, for example, intellectuals like Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper and Emmanuel Levinas did not often and clearly speak on the Final Solution, it clearly influenced their work. On Berlin, for example, his biographer writes that 'Auschwitz played a subliminal part. It was the thought of his own people, indecently deceived, going blindly to their deaths, which turned a theme into a conviction, and idea into a commitment'. Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A life* (London 1998) 201. Popper felt that writing *The Open Society and its Enemies* was his war work. In fiction, works as varied as Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* and Anne Holm's *I am David* are clearly refracting the Holocaust.

31 Saul Friedländer, 'Trauma, Transference and 'Working through'', 51.

32 Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and recovery* (London 1992) 236. Caruth is acutely aware of this problem: she writes that the 'study and treatment of trauma continue to face a crucial problem at the heart of this unique and difficult phenomenon: the problem of how to help relieve suffering, and how to understand the nature of that suffering, without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us' (Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction', *Trauma: experience and memory*, Cathy Caruth ed. (London 1995) vii).

the temptation of closure'.<sup>33</sup> What is needed, he writes is a 'simultaneous acceptance of two contradictory moves: the search for ever-closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naïve historical positivism leading to simplistic and self-assured historical narrations'.<sup>34</sup> Again here, the idea that a 'historical-scientific' truth (historical linkages) and a different from of truth, as a disruptive disclosure, emerges.

One way of maintaining this, he suggests, is for the 'voice of the commentator' to be clearly heard. Moreover, this voice should 'disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, withstand the need for closure' and make use of 'recurring refractions of a traumatic past by using any number of different vantage points'.<sup>35</sup> He continues, with reference to his debate with Brozat:

'The dimension added by the commentary may allow for an integration of the so-called "mythic memory" of the victims within the overall representation of this past without its becoming an "obstacle" to "rational historiography" [...] whereas the historical narrative may have to stress the ordinary aspects of everyday life during [...] the Nazi epoch, the 'voice over' of the victims memories may puncture such normality, at least at the level of memory... The reintroduction of individual memory into the over all representation of the epoch implies the use of contemporaries direct or indirect expressions of their experience. *Working through means confronting the individual voice* in a field dominated by political decisions and administrative decrees which neutralise the concreteness of despair and death (italics in original)'.<sup>36</sup>

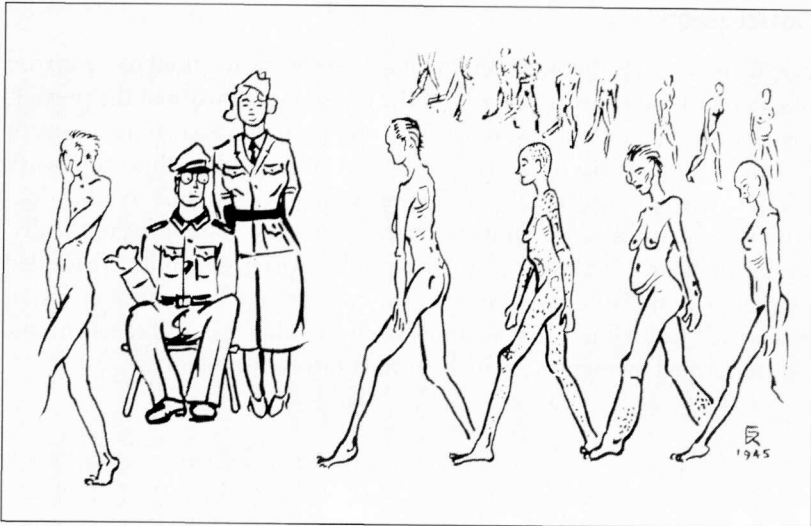
This might be taken as a programme statement for future histories, and underlies, to some extent, his 1997 *Nazi Germany and the Jews*. On the one hand, this sort of project admits the importance of historical 'science' while also being aware of its limitations. It aims for a work of history to be open to the non-verifiable power of the works which foreground the world of the victims. It is to be written contrapunctally, made up of a mixture of voices, including that of the narrator historian's own. James Young discusses Friedländer's methods, arguing correctly that 'this incorporation of these

33 Saul Friedländer, "Trauma, transference and "Working through", 52-3.

34 Friedländer, "Trauma, transference and 'Working through', 52.

35 Ibidem 53.

36 Ibidem 53.



'Selection among the women prisoners' door Francis Reisz. Uit: Teresa Swiebocka ed., *Auschwitz. A history in photographs*, (Warsaw 1990) 244.

voices into history has not led to an abandonment of historical standards but to a deepening of them.<sup>37</sup> However, he continues to suggest that 'he incorporates the living memory of survivors into historical narrative, not to privilege it but to show better how events were apprehended (or misapprehended) as they unfolded'.<sup>38</sup> To suggest this seems to imply that Friedländer is simply adding more pieces to the jigsaw puzzle, more facts for history. Crucially, his form of history is not, as it easily seems, simply the assimilation of survivors voices: to read it as such is to read it as if it were 'pre-Holocaust history' - and if writing history has been changed by the Holocaust, surely reading history has been changed too. Friedländer is trying to develop a form of history that has neither abandoned Rankean rigour nor is limited to it, that flows from memory but is aware of its dangers. It shuttles from memory to historical knowledge to memory again, holding these two apart and also together. This is not a solution to the problems of history in general or the 'insoluble historical and theoretical problems' or holocaust history in particular.<sup>39</sup> But it is an attempt to write history in the light of these problems.

37 James Young, 'Between History and Memory: the uncanny voices of the Historian and Survivor' in: *History and Memory* 9 (1997) 47-58, aldaar 51.

38 Young, 'Between History and Memory', 51.

39 Dan Diner, 'Between Aporia and Apology: on the limits of Historicizing National Socialism' in: *History and Memory* 9 (1997) 145, aldaar 144.

## Conclusion

Friedländer writes that the incremental 'knowledge acquired by historical research is usually integrated within the general framework of the prevailing historical consciousness of a group and moulded according to one of its extant frameworks of interpretation'.<sup>40</sup> Understanding this framework anew, in the light of the relation between memory and history, this does not offer a new historiography, but rather a new understanding of the discipline of history. We hold the two in a productive tension: both are needed to approach the Holocaust (and perhaps any event). We cannot abandon positivistic history, but that we must see it for what it is and see its limits: we are formed by memory, which, in turn forms our history.

<sup>40</sup> Friedländer, *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* viii.