

Leah Zazulyer

IF YOU COULD LICK MY HEART IT WOULD POISON YOU*

(A MANUSCRIPT IN PROGRESS)

When I began interviewing Holocaust survivors who live in my area of New York State, I had no intention of doing additional writing about their experiences as interviewees or mine as an interviewer. The interviews over time were of three types: People who had come from the region of Belarus from which my parents had emigrated prior to World War I; friends who had been hidden children in France, or survived Dachau, or *Reichskristallnacht*; and finally interviews of Holocaust survivors in WWII, done under the auspices of the Spielberg Visual History Foundation (SVHF). Initially I simply felt it was my moral obligation to do these, would learn from them, and could cope with the challenges.

Interviewers for the SVHF were carefully selected. The wide-ranging training, rigorous coding of data, and standardized videographic procedures were as scientific as such things can be. About 52,000 were done throughout the world in multiple languages and are now being disseminated.

However, I began to see each survivor's story as unique in terms of what psychology calls "the narrative of self," or the sociologist Goffman calls "the presentation of self in everyday life." It is true that on one level all the stories were similar: Life was pretty good before the war, hell during it, and bearable or better afterward. I came to realize that each survivor had a unique theme or pattern to how he or she presented his or her story. Usually it was a small incident, phrase, or idea that jumped out at me and seemed to be the very essence of their own psychic drama. Often it was symbolic or metaphoric. Sometimes they were aware of it; other times not. That is how I came to ask every interviewee if I might someday write about them. Each said yes without hesitation, often with the typical survivor's strong need to tell and retell their tale.

I immediately went home and tried to capture in THEIR voice, cadence, grammar, emphasis, what that unique phenomenological sensibility was in the case of each interviewee. I fabricated nothing. Slight editing came later. The form that seemed natural to the task was predominately the narrative monologue. Later I began to develop a second part to the manuscript which contained poems about MY experience of being an interviewer.

People who have done extensive interviews with survivors of one sort or another are often warned to “do something nice for yourself” after each harrowing experience in order to sustain one’s own mental health. I tried lunch, shopping, desserts, travel, visiting friends, talking with my own family—but ultimately despite some thinkers and writers having questioned the possibility of art after horror, art after horror was exactly what I felt the interviewees deserved and this interviewer craved.☞

*Quotation from a survivor interviewed by French film maker Claude Lanzmann in the eight-hour film *Shoah*.