

Michaela Wolf, ed. *Interpreting in Nazi Concentration Camps*.
New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, 248 p.

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Michaela Wolf, ed. *Interpreting in Nazi Concentration Camps*. New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, 248 p.

The 2015 Hungarian film *Son of Saul* is an exceptionally powerful Holocaust drama with a stunning sensory impact. Attentive to voices rather than image, blurring the visuals and turning up the sound, László Nemes' Oscar-winning movie introduces the spectator into a chaotic jumble of languages (Hungarian, German, Yiddish, Russian, Polish, French, Greek and Slovak are listed in the official description of the film) whose different intonations and accents echo and enhance the confusions of the camp experience.

By focusing on language, *Son of Saul* recalls Claude Lanzmann's landmark documentary *Shoah* (1985), remarkable for the way it foregrounded the specificity of language in all aspects of the Shoah through interviews with survivors and with the complicit populations of Polish townspeople. Lanzmann understood that images of the Holocaust had over time lost their power to shock, and that only individual narratives could restore some of the horrific affects of the experience. His long film (ten hours) patiently listened to individual accounts and included on screen the dialogue with interpreters. These layers of interpretation were one of the marks of Lanzmann's originality. The interpreters became part of the action, serving as "first witnesses" to the terrible events recounted.

Nemes' and Lanzmann's films are rare artefacts in the vast library of Holocaust literature—unusual in that they highlight language and linguistic diversity as a key element of the Holocaust experience. Like Michaela Wolf's important collection, *Interpreting in Nazi Concentration Camps*, they lead us to question the overwhelming neglect of language in Holocaust studies. What might be the reason for this? David Gramling suggests in his chapter, "Translanguagers and the Concentrationary Universe" (pp. 43–60), that languages were "inevitably tabled as 'luxury problems' in the struggle to communicate 'the informational truths of the Shoah internationally'" (p. 43). "Researching the Shoah multilingually entails shifting focus from memoirists' referential representations toward the translational means and procedures by which these are furnished and made possible (p. 53). Or it might be because, as Naomi Seidman has suggested in her splendid essay, "The Holocaust in Every Tongue" (from

Faithful Renderings, 2006), that the fact that the Holocaust took place in languages other than English and that it is necessarily a translated experience, might allow for questioning of the authenticity of testimony. Translation calls attention to the fact that no experience is unmediated, even one as singular and cruel as the Holocaust. This insight is best expressed by Francine Kaufmann in the conclusion of her important essay in the volume “The Ambiguous Task of the Interpreter in Lanzmann’s Films *Shoah* and *Sobibor*: Between the Director and the Survivors of the Camps and Ghettos” (pp. 161-181): “Interpretation, with all its shortcomings (errors, omissions, hesitations, additions) is a metaphor for any testimony: one sees and hears, but one’s memory cannot reproduce faithfully all that was said: it always selects, interprets and misrepresents” (p. 176).

Entering difficult terrain, Michaela Wolf’s collection is an important beginning to systematic study in this area. The specific area of language mediation, in particular in the context of the camps, has been very little explored in Holocaust studies, with the exception of work devoted to the translation of the Holocaust legacy (Seidman, 2006; Rosen, 2005). In Translation Studies, research on concentration camps belongs to a strand of investigation with an interest in situations of conflict, extreme violence and their aftermath. Such situations were broached in Wolf’s recent anthology *Framing the Interpreter* (with Anxo Fernández-Ocampo, 2014) an innovative collection that used photographic images as the basis for discussion of the material history of interpreting activities, as well as in a growing body of studies such as the histories of the Nuremberg trials, of the International War Crimes tribunal, translation in wartime and specific conflict areas (Elias-Bursac, 2015; Inghilleri, 2012; Baigorri-Jalon, 2011; Heimburger, 2012; Tobia and Baker, 2012).

One can understand the intrinsic difficulties of research into Nazi concentration camps, the disturbing nature of the documentation and the very sensitive issues it leads to, in particular in relation to the “official position” of interpreter, which was created in many, but not all, of the camps. The interpreter job in Nazi concentration camps belonged to the “prisoner-functionary” category (p. 4) and came with privileges as well as with moral dilemmas. Interpreters could work for or against their fellow-inmates; they were portrayed in survivor accounts as

heroic and devoted intermediaries or, on the contrary, as lackeys and traitors. In “Linguistic Terror in Nazi Concentration Camps: Lucien and Gilbert – Portraits of Two ‘Interpreters’” (pp. 63-79), Heidi Aschenberg mines the memoirs of Robert Antelme to draw portraits of two opposing translators, the first of whom became a hero to his fellow inmates, the second murdered by them as soon as liberation provided the opportunity.

The subject is also difficult because it challenges our definition of what translation might be. To say that translation is an activity practiced by humans is normally a truism. But what seems like a minimal condition for translation is challenged by extreme conditions of violence and conflict, and in particular by a situation in which a population of people is treated as non-human. The premise of the Nazi concentration camp was that Jews were non-humans, destined to die in the camps either immediately or after a short period of forced labour. Can language interactions in those circumstances be treated under the conventional rubric of translation? Is it not then appropriate to learn that in Mauthausen the term “Dolmetscher” or interpreter was applied not only to human intermediaries but to the baton wielded by the Kapos (camp authorities)—and whose actions were immediately understandable? (pp. 49 and 70).

Wolf begins her preface by acknowledging that in order to enter into “historical engagement with the history of Nazi terror” (p. 1), and to take a deeper look at the social mechanisms underlying the universe of the camps and the specificity of the bizarre bureaucracies that structured life in each camp, we must leave aside paradigms of “incomprehensibility” and “incomparability” (p. 1). This means engaging with the material history of the regimes devised by the Nazis. It also means taking the point of view of the inmates themselves and studying the vocabularies and mediating strategies they themselves devised in order to overcome the language divides. Such investigation is in some ways “authorized” by Primo Levi himself whose essay “On Translating and Being Translated” (pp. 87-95) is a key contribution to the volume, and abundantly quoted by most of the authors in the volume.

Levi is the one survivor who has most persistently highlighted multilingualism in the camp experience. His observations serve as the basis for many of the commentaries. Levi was Italian, and

especially aware of the life-preserving functions of language in the camp. Most Italians in Auschwitz spoke neither German nor Yiddish, the language of the commanders on the one hand and of the overwhelming majority of the Jewish prisoners on the other. But different camps had different kinds of protocols for language, as we learn, and the experience of political prisoners were different again. So as Wolf argues, detailed research on all the camps is required.

This research is highlighted in the articles by Michaela Wolf on Mathausen (pp. 95-115) and Malgorzata Tryuk on Majdanek (pp. 115-135). In both cases, these articles are based on archival research carried out either in the camp archives or in survivor memoirs. Wolf explains that of the 350 texts she consulted (books, articles, interviews, reports), more than half contained passages which describe situations involving interpreting. The authors of these accounts are usually political prisoners; Jewish accounts constitute a small minority. One might surmise that interpretation was more important for political prisoners, who were treated more like humans, or perhaps that, Yiddish and German being very similar, most Jews understood the German commands without interpretation. Tryuk provides detailed information on translators in Majdanek, adding to the important work she has already done on the subject of translation and the Third Reich. It becomes clear that, as in all aspects of research on the Holocaust, attention to detail and to the specificity of each particular experience (different camps, different linguistic origins, etc.) is crucial to establishing the historical record.

The volume's five sections include a variety of materials and approaches, from the initial section which provides a useful general discussion of "The Concentration Camp Universe" to the two sections most germane to the study itself: "Language Diversity in the Camps" and "Interpreting in the Camps." Other chapters provide contextual information on camp life, as well as analyses of interpretation in Soviet prison of war camps and reflections on the post-Holocaust legacy.

Of remarkable interest in the volume is the essay by Francine Kaufmann devoted to her role as interpreter in Lanzmann's *Shoah*. In "The Ambiguous Task of the Interpreter in Lanzmann's Films *Shoah* and *Sobibor*, Between the Director and Survivors of the

Camps and Ghettos,” Kaufmann provides an invaluable account of the role of the language mediator in one of the most singular and significant cinematic productions of the last decades.

Kaufmann’s essay sheds exceptional light on the making of a 20th-century film classic. Kaufmann was the interpreter from Hebrew into French and French into Hebrew, and she explains the very explicit role that Lanzmann devised for his interpreters. Lanzmann was not a neutral presence in his own film; he used various kinds of devices to provoke and shape the remarks of his interviewees, and he was similarly aware of the filmic effects of language mediation. Lanzmann noted that the presence of interpreters was part of the polyphony of the film, and in some cases he chose to turn the camera on the interpreter. The presence of language mediation in the film added significantly to its length, but it is clear that his inclusion of the translation process added not only to the esthetic integrity but to the sense of authenticity of the film.

The background of the interpreter was also crucial to Lanzmann in choosing the Yiddish translator for the extraordinary testimony of Mordechai Podchlebnik, a rare survivor of a Sonderkommando. Podchlebnik had never told his story to his family and so the interpreter was in fact the first person to hear the horrific details of his story. Her function was not only to interpret but to react as a “first witness,” reacting with shock to the details of the testimony and anticipating the emotions of the film spectators (p. 174).

Kaufmann’s account reinforces our admiration for Lanzmann and the careful structure he devised for his film—even if this structure involved elements of manipulation. Kaufmann reveals that for her the experience of working with Lanzmann was at once a ‘sacred duty’ and a confusing, emotional assignment. Her essay is a crucial element for our understanding of the film and of extreme experiences of interpretation.

The cover of the book is somewhat enigmatic. The image apparently (according to the written explanation) shows a Soviet slave labourer pointing out a former Nazi guard who brutally beat prisoners. Where is the link to interpreters? Why a Soviet labourer? What is more, the images are inverted so that the pointing is going in the wrong direction. These inaccuracies are

a disservice to an important book based on scrupulous research. Wolf's volume is an important beginning. It provides a solid basis for continued research into a subject of enduring significance.

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