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Pam Maclean
Senior Lecturer in History,
School of History, Heritage and Society
Faculty of Arts,
Deakin University,
Australia

«You leaving me alone?» The persistence of ethics during the Holocaust¹

Many Holocaust scholars subscribe to the theory that under the unimaginable stress of Holocaust persecution, Jewish victims found that, in extremis, conventional morality did not apply. On the basis of an analysis of a sample of videotestimonies held in the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne, Australia (hereafter the JHMRC), this article argues that such assumptions require revision. Despite observing numerous instances of unconscionable behaviour, in these videotestimonies survivors provide many examples of their own ethical practices and those of others.

The notion that ethics broke down during the Holocaust has a long history. Anna Pawelczynska in Values and Violence in Auschwitz (1979) contends that conditions in Auschwitz inevitably resulted in the erosion of prisoners' ethical values.² The most influential account of moral collapse can be found in Lawrence Langer's Versions of Survival published three years later. Drawing on the writing of Primo Levi Langer developed a bleak vision of a moral universe where ethics became irrelevant, as Jews were

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Resistance is the one area where scholars agree that Jews acted ethically. In Yehuda Bauer’s words by, "standing up" against Nazi oppression, resisters retained their moral integrity and preserved their dignity and humanity. Most commonly armed and organised resistance are highlighted, but less tangible manifestations of resistance include mutual cooperation designed to counter oppression, spontaneous, individual acts of kindness and caring (particularly towards strangers as suggested in the work of Tzvetan Todorov and Henryk Swiebocki) and Glass's discussion of practising the Jewish religion against all odds. The philosopher Didier Pollefyeyt, however, does not confine ethical action to the realm of resistance when he argues that, through the practice of "daily virtue", Jews continued to behave morally during the Holocaust. Eschewing the grand, heroic gesture of resistance as the primary method of countering the Nazi dehumanisation of Jews, Pollefyeyt

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5 For example, Yehuda Bauer’s terminology, amidah - in Hebrew meaning to "stand up against", encompasses both passive and active resistance. Yehuda BAUER, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 120.
8 GLASS, *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust*, passim.
11 The respondents in the videotestimonies were not explicitly asked about their approach to ethical questions and their attitudes to ethics emerged in the course of the interview. Interviews (carried out over a number of years by the JHMKC) follow the format of asking about pre-Holocaust life, Holocaust experiences and post-Holocaust adjustment and migration experiences. I was not involved in the interview process.
12 I am grateful to my research assistants Donna-Lee Friese and Janette Sato, without whose classification and summaries of videotestimonies, the choice of appropriate videotestimonies would have proven impossible. This article comes out of an Australian Research Council funded Linkage project with Dr. Michele Langfield, Deakin University, Australia and Dr Peter Monteath, Flinders University, Australia. Donna-Lee Friese's comments on an earlier draft were extremely helpful.
argues that, in extremis, everyday acts of kindness preserved Jewish humanity and, thus, their capacity to act ethically. Pollefeyt explicitly disagrees with Langer’s assertion that Jews were left without meaningful choices. On the contrary, he contends that, except in the most extreme of circumstances, «ethical choices remained ... Many camp prisoners could not choose the purely good any longer but were still often able to choose between more evil or less evil». Because videotestimony is constituted by the recounting of small details from the everyday experiences of «ordinary» people, it provides an ideal medium for assessing Pollefeyt’s argument.

Two further theorists whose work is pertinent to this discussion of Jewish ethics during the Holocaust are Ervin Staub and Martin Buber. Staub’s emphasis on the maintenance of empathy in the context of genocide provides an important framework for considering the dynamics of ethical practice, as does Buber’s philosophy that locates ethics within the «I-Thou» relationship - the capacity to respond altruistically to an other’s needs. Because, according to Buber’s approach, ethics is situationally defined and does not rely on following a prescribed set of rules, it is of particular value for interpreting victim behaviour at a time when conventional rules seem to be of no relevance.10

This article draws on eight of the over 1400 videotestimonies held at the JHMRC. In order to locate videotestimonies whose respondents revealed their attitudes toward the practice of ethics during the Holocaust, accounts were selected in which the interviewee referred to a prewar family background of socialist activism, religious or secular community involvement, and/or a commitment to humanistic values.11 Videotestimonies where such a background was associated with involvement in resistance activity during the Holocaust were of particular interest, given that the broader Holocaust literature has so closely identified active resistance with ethical behaviour.12 Of the eight videotestimonies analysed, four were by women and four by men. These accounts describe a broad range of Holocaust settings, including ghettoisation, life in labour and extermination camps, death marches, hiding and partisan resistance. Geographical locations reach as far afield as Germany, Poland, Croatia, Hungary and Slovakia. While it is nonsensical to generalise about the ethical behaviour of Jewish victims in the Holocaust on the basis of such a small sample, arguably these videotestimonies tell the stories of a much broader cross-section of «ordinary» people, than do the «literary» sources used by many Holocaust theorists. Indeed, because oral and (video) history accounts lack the «polish» of published testimonies such as those by Elie Wiesel or Levi, they embody the raw emotions of lived experience and are of immense value to those seeking insights into how ethics are practically realised in action.13

Following an examination of Staub and Buber’s notions of empathy and ethics the focus of the article shifts to an exploration of three areas of ethical behaviour that emerge in the videotestimonies themselves: the building of empathetic relationships, the associated phenomenon of sibling or surrogate sibling relationships and the connection between ethics and participation in organised resistance activities. Consideration of gender also cuts across some of this discussion.

Staub and Buber on empathy and ethics

Like Pollefeyt, Staub contends that it is possible for victims to behave in an ethical man-
ner during genocides. In addition, he emphasises the influence of pre-genocidal attitudes on their behaviour. According to Staub, individuals, despite being subjected to extreme suffering, can develop the necessary «moral courage» to act ethically:

In the case of survivors of genocide, many of them had their basic needs fulfilled through close, loving connections to their families and their group before the genocide and to other survivors afterward. In addition, many survivors were helped by other people. Many also engaged in courageous action to help themselves. This was true of survivors of the Holocaust: even young children often engaged in amazing acts of initiative to help themselves or their families [...]. Such experiences fulfill, in the midst of horrible circumstances, needs for connection, effectiveness, and identity and a comprehension of reality that provides hope and makes caring for others possible.  

At the heart of the realisation of connection lies the capacity for empathy - the identification with the perspective of an other. Empathy can develop as a result of the formation of a relationship to another person (an «affective» relationship) or as a consequence of «moral belief», or a combination of the two.  

Importantly, empathetic behaviour manifests itself in altruistic practice, which is itself motivated by a morality based on «beliefs, and principles that they [people] have internalized and/or developed and that lead them to promote others’ welfare». Many of the videotestimony respondents openly acknowledge the importance of the values they learnt from their parents as triggers for ethical action.

Arguably, because empathy presupposes both an assertion of humanity and a recognition of humanity, examples of empathetic action in the Holocaust are inherently ethical and constitute an assertion of humanity in the face of intended dehumanisation. Buber’s ethics, at the core of which lie «responsibility and responding» by and to an authentic self, is remarkably relevant to the circumstances that are described in the videotestimonies. While Buber rejects the term «empathy» in favour of «inclusion», because he fears that «empathy» may imply the absorption of the other by the «I» in the «I-Thou» relationship, his term «inclusion» (that suggests the preservation of the autonomy of each person in the «I-Thou» relationship) mirrors Staub’s concept of empathy.

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15 Ibid., 35.
16 Ibid.
19 ROTHENSTREICH, Buber’s Dialogical Thoughts, 118.
20 «Ruth», Interview (Melbourne, Australia : Jewish Holocaust Centre, 1993), DVD.
An emphasis on the practical makes Buber’s ethics even more pertinent to understanding what constitutes ethical behaviour as revealed in the videotestimonies. Stuart Charmé notes that the creation of an «I-Thou» relationship presupposes the actual recognition of an other. Charmé highlights the importance of locating awareness of the other within real situations:

Clearly, even in I-Thou relations of an ethical sort, one experiences and has conscious knowledge about the Thou. What I-Thou adds to one’s knowledge is a kind of intuition or inner understanding of the other’s point of view. Buber calls this process «imagining the real», which means the capacity to imagine what another person is wishing, feeling, perceiving and thinking, not as an abstraction but as the other person lives it.\(^{18}\)

Nathan Rothenstreich succinctly reiterates this point with the observation that Buber’s ethics stress the «immediate relations between the two human beings».\(^{19}\) That such «immediate relations» were possible during the Holocaust and the nature of these relations is evident in the videotestimonies.

**Empathy in practice**

Although survivors recount their experiences decades after they occurred, their testimonies retain a remarkable sense of immediacy as ethical dilemmas are relived. While describing her family’s incarceration in the Oskusz ghetto in Poland, «Ruth» gives a textbook definition of empathy. She explains why it hurt her so much when she looked at her parents:

The hardest thing for me was looking at my parents or at my sister but at my parents noticing the pain in their faces at times. I sup... and I realise now just as I was looking at them there were, there were pain in the faces because they looked at me and they felt helpless, you see. So that was for me the hardest thing not what I was deprived of but looking at my little sister or looking at my splendid parents who had to live in those eh... and I did and I wanted to do everything to, although I was at that time twelve I wanted to do everything to protect my mother, I didn’t want her to see that ugliness...\(^{20}\)

«Ruth» reverses the role of the child as the one who is cared for by imagining that she is the one responsible for her mother’s care. «Ruth» shows remarkable insight into the factors underpinning her value system. She illustrates the pivotal role her parents played in shaping her value system by recalling an incident during her childhood when she was sent with a basket of food to one of her father’s ill employees. Although her parents were practising Jews, the family lived in an area shared by Jewish and Christian Poles and they stressed the importance of showing consideration to all people, especially if one wanted to be shown consideration in return: «They believe in humanity - everybody is human». «Ruth» frequently intersperses her testimony with observations about her parents’ ethical uprightness, the memory of which she believes enabled her to endure her later incarceration in a concentration camp.

«Ruth’s» story illustrates perfectly Staub’s argument that *moral courage*, «the courage to express important values in words and actions, even in the face of opposition, potential disapproval, and ostracism or a violent response» can be learnt by exposure to a caring and loving environment that reinforces empathy and altruism.\(^{21}\) In other words, a strong ethical grounding prior to persecution may enhance the likelihood of retaining one’s ethical orientation under the most difficult of circumstances. Staub points out that, although the capacity for empathy
can develop independently of a nurturing upbringing, the reestablishment of trust, so vital for recovery from trauma, requires exposure to caring individuals.  

While «Ruth» articulates her ethical values with striking clarity, she is by no means alone in describing the interaction between pre-Holocaust upbringing and respondents’ ongoing understandings of their Holocaust experiences. «Vera», whose family lived in the Bosnian region of Yugoslavia, trained as a doctor after the war. She regards her practice of medicine as a natural realisation of her parents’ ethical values. (Her parents were murdered by the Croatian militia, in December 1941). Throughout the interview, «Vera» reiterates that she was brought up to «love people, to help people». Because of his education as an engineer, her father was held in high regard by the non-Jewish community, many of whom had only a limited education, and he took these responsibilities very seriously, stressing to «Vera» the importance of empathy: «what’s the difference, we all have two eyes, a nose and a mouth. What’s the difference in colour, religion ... we should all respect each other individually» - a philosophy that «Vera» has passed on to her son. Her father’s kindness was rewarded by a non-Jewish family that rescued «Vera» from the camp where she was incarcerated, hiding her until she joined a local partisan group. «Vera» comments that she was treated «like a member of the family».

Empathy was by no means confined to women. «Abram’s» family was imprisoned in the Lodz ghetto from its inception in June 1940 until its liquidation in July 1944, when its remaining inhabitants were sent to Auschwitz. «Abram’s» experiences after deportation to Auschwitz are picked up later in the article. In contrast to «Ruth» and «Vera», «Abram» came from a struggling, working-class family. His father was a baker who before the war endured frequent unemployment and his mother was a seamstress. «Abram» describes his father as an «idealist who wanted to change the world» and this was reflected in his involvement with the Jewish trade union movement. His father confined his social contacts to other Jews. As conditions deteriorated and food rations became more and more inadequate, «Abram» tells how he would find an extra slice of bread in his soup. Asked by the interviewer where this came from, «Abram» emotionally comments, «My mother was never hungry».

«Abram’s» understanding of his ghetto experience is strongly influenced by his parents’ caring behaviour, not only towards the family, but also other ghetto inhabitants. The following anecdote about the ghetto leadership illustrates his father’s response to the corrupt behaviour of the ghetto leadership. Each

21 STAUB, «The Roots of Goodness», 53. Staub claims empathy can be learnt through simple imitation. In addition, a concern for humanity as a whole can develop out of individual empathetic relationships.

22 Ibid., 59.

23 «Vera», Interview (Melbourne, Australia: Jewish Holocaust Centre, 1999), DVD.

24 Na’ama SHIK, «Weibliche Erfahrung in Auschwitz-Birkenau», in Genozid und Geschlecht: Jüdische Frauen im Nationalsozialistischen Lagersystem, ed. Gisela Bock (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2005), 106-10. Shik argues that, contrary to much of the literature, emotional responses to the Holocaust (in this case, Auschwitz-Birkenau) were not gendered.

25 «Abram», Interview (Melbourne, Australia: Jewish Holocaust Centre, 1993), DVD.

26 ROTH, Ethics during and after the Holocaust, 81ff. Roth touches on the question of Nazi ethics and conscience but not from the perspective of empathetic relations with Jews.

27 «Gabriel», Interview (Melbourne, Australia: Jewish Holocaust Centre, 1994), DVD.
ghetto was governed by a Nazi-approved Jewish Council (Judenrat), headed by a Jewish «Elder». Chaim Rumkowski, notorious for his despotic and corrupt approach to ghetto rule, was the leader of the Lodz ghetto. «Abram» describes how Rumkowski demanded that the ghetto court sentence a Jewish «criminal» to death. The judges refused:

And Rumkowski took away their bread rations. Father and friends of father organised those judges won’t go without bread... he collected bread [interviewee clarifies that it was the judges not the criminal who lost their bread rations]. He took away the rations from the judges because the judges wouldn’t commit themselves to this atrocious decision. It’s not talked about this decision, it’s a fact, the truth, you can’t commit this to paper.

This story is told within the broader context of «Abram’s» account of survival strategies, most of which involved mutual assistance through the practice of «daily virtue». For instance, «Abram» describes how the provision of sawdust for a slow-burning fire enabled a man, bed-ridden with illness and cold, to get out of bed. When asked to comment on ghetto pain and suffering, «Abram» replies, «I know what it feels like, I was there myself».

«Gabriel’s» family lived in an outer suburb of Budapest. Although he came from a practising Jewish family, «Gabriel» was partly educated at a Catholic school and his best friend was Catholic. His father was a committed Social Democrat who was «very much involved with society generally». Indeed, «Gabriel» remembers attending Christmas dinners at his father’s non-Jewish friend’s house. «Gabriel», also a Social Democrat, was actively engaged in the labour movement. His emotional generosity is evident in his account of conditions in Hungary during the war. While by no means downplaying the brutality of the Nazis and their Hungarian sympathisers, «Gabriel» continually acknowledges the «righteousness» of non-Jews who helped him and his family. The «righteous» included his non-Jewish, German sister-in-law, a Hungarian army captain who tried to help Jews attached to his unit as forced labour and Hungarian underground workers who provided Jews with Red Cross passports. «Gabriel’s» recognition of the help of others suggests a seldom-discussed dimension of the empathetic relationship that is evident in a number of the videotestimonies - the apparent predisposition of some people to attract empathy, even from the Nazis themselves. Thus, «Gabriel» describes how after 1944 when the situation for Jews deteriorated rapidly and Hungarian officers subjected him and other Jews to humiliating treatment, a sympathetic captain (whom the Germans later imprisoned for insubordination) intervened to stop «Gabriel» being punished for alleged sabotage. The captain asserted, «we are still human beings despite of the German occupation and you can’t do these things». Reflecting on the captain’s behaviour, «Gabriel» concludes, «he was a very good man».

Like «Gabriel», «Leon», who had survived the liquidation of the Minsk ghetto and endured life in a number of labour camps, found his situation ameliorated through intervention from an unexpected quarter. The Ukrainian in charge of the Budzin labour camp (a satellite of the Majdanek camp near Lublin) singled him out because of his talent for singing Russian songs. One night at two am he summoned «Leon», plied him with vodka and food and told him to sing in Russian. Obviously homesick, the Ukrainian claimed that Russian Jews were superior to Polish Jews and could be treated differently. After that, «Leon» was
periodically asked to sing and received a number of privileges. He was given cigarettes, new boots and, because he was no longer searched when coming back into the camp, he was able to smuggle in money. In both these cases the persecutor appears to recognise a common humanity between himself and the putative victim.

«Martin» also recounts a number of incidents where he was the beneficiary of empathy from his persecutors. «Martin» was brought up in a small Slovakian town near the border of the Ukraine. His parents made sure that he received a thorough Jewish education and decades after the end of the Holocaust «Martin» continues to rationalise his suffering within a biblical framework. After the German annexation of Czechoslovakia in 1939, Slovakia became a nominally independent puppet state of the Nazis and under its leader, Father Jozef Tiszo, anti-Semitism intensified markedly. Nonetheless, the family was respected, remained relatively immune from day-to-day persecution and was spared deportation. In February-March 1944, in response to rumours about increasing danger, «Martin's» family arranged for him and his brother to be smuggled across the Slovakian border to the relative safety of Budapest, where he remained until the German occupation of Hungary in mid-1944.

After their capture by the Nazis, both «Martin» and his brother were deported to Auschwitz but escaped immediate selection for the gas chambers. A number of telling observations reveal «Martin's» capacity for empathy. Although he acknowledges the importance of protecting his own interests, he still felt a deep sense of responsibility to care for others: «I had to look after myself and everybody else at thirteen years of age». Asked whether he despised the Kaposi (privileged prisoners who ran the barracks) «Martin» was able to transcend personal self-interest when commenting that he did not hate the Kaposi, indeed, he had a «lot of respect» for them because «somebody had to do the job».

After three months in Auschwitz, which according to «Martin», was a «sanatorium» compared with Bergen-Belsen, the brothers were transferred to the Trezbinia labour camp near Krakow. «Martin» describes how he attracted favourable treatment because he was regarded as a good worker - soliciting an empathetic response in return. The Pole supervising his work saw that «Martin» was good with his hands and nominated him as the foreman, which relieved him of much of the more arduous physical work. Later when «Martin» had abscesses removed from his leg and could not work or report for food, his boss «the Polish goyim» delivered food to the camp for him. This probably saved his life because within a week the camp was evacuated and «Martin» and his brother commenced a Death March to Bergen-Belsen. Without the food, it is doubtful that «Martin» would have been strong enough to survive.

Frequently Holocaust survivors attribute their survival to the fortunate intervention of an external helper. While not wanting to underestimate the role played by «luck», it may be worth speculating about whether or not those who maintained their inherent humanity, as evidenced in their consistent

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28 «Leon», Interview (Melbourne, Australia: Jewish Holocaust Centre, 1995), DVD.
29 «Martin», Interview (Melbourne, Australia: Jewish Holocaust Centre, 1992), DVD.
30 The opposite was the case for the so-called Mischmänner - concentration camp inmates who lost the will to live and soon perished.
31 «Abram», Interview.
capacity for behaving ethically, enhanced their likelihood of attracting empathy (and assistance) from others. Although, in the wider scheme of things, there was obviously no possibility of countering the arbitrary murderousness of the Nazis, prewar socialisation into empathetic behaviour may also have been a factor, albeit in a small number of cases.

**Sibling and pseudo-sibling bonds**

The bonds between siblings were among the strongest empathetic relationships that endured the extremes of the Holocaust. Whether in camps or ghettos, survivors frequently attribute a will to live to the support of their siblings. «Martin’s» story is no exception. When «Martin» and his brother reached the gates of Bergen-Belsen, their final destination, «Martin» observed, «this (camp) is the worst of the lot that I have seen». He witnessed «hundreds of dead people» lying on the ground and said to his brother that they had to do everything possible to get out. Sadly, his brother contracted typhus and only «Martin» survived to liberation.

When «Martin’s» brother was sent to a hospital barrack, «Martin» artificially raised his own temperature to 41 degrees in order to be transferred to his brother’s hospital: After his brother’s death, «Martin» saw no reason to continue living. Shortly before his brother’s death, however, «Martin» had heard from another prisoner that his parents were still alive and he promised his brother to survive in order to tell them what they had endured. «Martin» had lain next to his dead brother for three days without telling anyone he had died. His comments on his motivations for staying so long with his dead brother are highly ambivalent: «Maybe I wanted his portion of bread. Maybe I couldn’t stand him getting the strap on his leg and being carted all around». He questions his response as a human being and immediately proceeds to describe how he had lain in a barracks for several days observing how a dying prisoner had hidden bread under his pillow but was too weak to eat it. Although sorely tempted he resisted stealing the bread. After the prisoner’s death, he went to retrieve the bread, only to find that someone else had stolen it. «Martin» ascribes his «ethical» act to his «fear of god», and yet, coming so soon after his brother’s death, it seems more likely that he behaved towards the dyeing man as he would have towards his brother.

«Martin’s guilt at surviving his brother has parallels with «Abram’s» response. Following his family’s deportation to Auschwitz in the last days of the Lodz ghetto, «Abram’s» parents were immediately selected for gassing, and «Abram» now took on responsibility for looking after his brother who had also survived selection. «Abram» realised that the only way to get out of Auschwitz was to gain work in an outside camp. «Abram» was chosen, but unfortunately his brother was not. «Abram» breaks down as he describes the impact of his brother’s parting words: «You leaving me here alone». He comments that the words still haunt him, especially as his mother told him to look after his brother always. Nonetheless, while «Abram» claims he had failed «as a brother and as a human», the enduring nature of the bond he feels with his brother testifies to his essential humanity. His continuing sense of guilt confirms an orientation to the ethical that the Nazis failed to destroy.

Not all sibling relationships were based on biological ties. In camps sibling-like attachments formed between strangers, provided mutual protection and countered an ethos of individualism. In July 1942 the Nazis
liquidated the Polish ghetto where «Ruth» had been incarcerated and she was sent with six other women to a small labour camp where 150 men worked as forced labourers and the women cooked and cleaned. Conditions were harsh. Food was inadequate and the thin clothing provided scant protection from the elements. «Ruth’s» videotestimony, like those of «Vera» and «Chana» (to be referred to later) is intense and self-reflexive. She describes how the older girls adopted her as a younger sister. Their friendship helped her survive physically and, more importantly, in her opinion, spiritually. When she became ill in the camp and underwent debilitating surgery the girls took over her kitchen duties, calling out in unison during the roll call to hide her absence. The final camp in which «Ruth» found herself was enormous and she felt lost. Fortunately, one of the women from the first camp held an influential position in the new camp and, because she could not stand «Ruth’s» suffering, she shared extra food with her, and also «warmth and friendship». According to «Ruth», caring was the key to her physical and spiritual survival. In particular, focusing on «goodness and kindness», rather than on hunger, ensured that she survived spiritually. In contrast to her positive memories of fellow prisoners, she says she experienced no kindness from Germans.\footnote{See Brana GUREWITSCH, ed., Mothers, Sisters, Resistors. Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), 99. Referring to her interviews with: «camp sisters», Gurewitsch asks, «Did their similar predicaments create the bond? Why did these women not destroy each other in conflict over scarce resources? There seems to be no other such instance with which to compare this episode». Shik on the other hand suggests that the creation of surrogate family relationships was not limited to women and did not reflect a peculiarly female orientation towards caring, SHIK, «Weibliche Erfahrungen», 113-17.}

The pain prompted by the deaths of «Martin» and «Abram»'s brothers bears testament to the strength of the sibling bond and affirms the presence of ethical values within the camps. Arguably, in «Abram»'s case, the persistence of caring decades after his brother’s death can be considered as ethical behaviour as staying with his brother and facing inevitable death.\footnote{«Ruth», Interview.} «Ruth’s» role as a substitute sibling confirmed her belief in the power of collectivism over individualism.

**Engaging in resistance**

As indicated in the introduction, the literature on Holocaust ethics identifies resistance as the one area where ethical behaviour was possible. Before commencing research for this article, I therefore had anticipated that the videotestimonies given by those involved in resistance would be the main focus of my discussion and that they would highlight the interconnection between resistance activity and a belief by respondents...
that they had behaved ethically. To my surprise, interviewees seemed not to associate their formal involvement in resistance movements with ethical action. Instead, their discussion of ethics focused on the practice of empathetic relationships in everyday life outside of resistance movements. Their accounts did not automatically connect involvement in solidaristic activity or principled action with ethical behaviour. By assessing their ethical practices within a situational framework, rather than against the externally created values associated with formal resistance, these survivors present an alternative to the dominant academic model of Holocaust ethics.

To illustrate this point, let us return to «Vera's» videotestimony. «Vera» was rescued from a concentration camp in Bosnia and went into hiding with her parents' friends. When she comes to the next stage of her story and describes her involvement with partisans, whom she joined when they had briefly visited the town where she was hiding, «Vera's» story abruptly changes pace, moving away from introspection and reflection to a much more matter-of-fact commentary. Her main motivation for joining seems to have been concern for the safety of the family hiding her and frustration with her confinement, rather than commitment to the ideal of destroying Nazism. Despite being prompted by the interviewer to dwell on «heroic» details of partisan life, «Vera» is relatively unforthcoming. She remembers the cold, hunger and constant moving around, but comments that she never came close to being in danger. Membership of the partisan group did not imbue her with a sense of solidarity. For instance, although she was still a teenager, she comments that no one looked after her per se, treating her instead as an adult. For someone who was «brought up to care for people» and considered herself to be a caring person, the partisan experience was alienating and failed to create the empathetic environment that for her was a prerequisite for ethical action.35

«Vera's» memories of resistance differ markedly from those of «Chana», who admired the work of the underground, but did not believe that she was engaged in resistance. «Chana's» family had moved to Paris from Poland in 1930 to escape anti-Semitism. Her parents sent her to a socialist-Jewish youth group. While she enjoyed its social activity, she had little to do with its political programs. In 1942 the family moved to Unoccupied France with the help of the underground. Following the German occupation of Vichy France, the underground continued to find the family safe hiding places. «Chana» repeatedly expresses her gratitude to the underground, observing that «so many gave away their life to help people hiding». What is most intriguing here is that «Chana» does not portray herself as part of the resistance, although because of her knowledge of French she was integral to her family’s survival, acting as an intermediary between her parents and the underground. In one anecdote she mentions a meeting organised by the French Jewish underground that brought together other hidden Jewish youth in a forest, where they sang Hebrew songs. While historians such as Bauer consider the assertion of Jewish identity in the face of danger to be a clear example of resistance, «Chana» does not interpret her involvement in this way.36 «Chana» admits that because of her youth she took risks she would never contemplate now, however, she goes to great pains to distance herself from the «heroics» of the «real» resistance.37

«Masza's» account of her membership of a partisan group presents an even less idealised view than that of «Vera». «Vera» lived in an eastern Polish town, occupied by the
Russians in 1939 and the Germans in 1941. Following a brief period of ghettoisation and forced labour interspersed with mass shootings, «Masza» decided she had to escape. She climbed over the ghetto wall and hid in the forest, suffering from hunger and cold. She felt she was as much at risk from the Poles as from the Nazis. Finally, she went to hide under a bush, only to discover that it camouflaged the entrance to a bunker where Jewish partisans were hiding. One of them risked his life by coming out and pulling her into the bunker. She was later taken to a larger partisan camp, consisting of Jews, Poles and Russians, where she remained from 1942-44. She attributes her survival to a marriage of convenience to a man who had lost his wife and children. She comments that «If you were single, it wasn’t very good … a single girl was terrible ... old men with young girls», implying that single women were as much at risk from fellow partisans, as from the putative enemy. Following liberation «Masza» describes how she left her husband to return to her hometown in an unsuccessful search for her prewar fiancé. Only after confirmation of his death did she return to her husband. Far from being grounded in empathy, her relationship with her husband was driven by the desire for protection. Indeed, her account hints at sexual abuse by the partisans. In addition, her membership of the partisans was motivated by the necessity of finding a place of refuge, rather than a commitment to armed resistance. Although no one can be critical of «Masza's» tenacity in surviving, because her resistance story is so self-involved (in contrast to her account of her life in the ghetto where she readily acknowledges support from others, including a German), there is no room for empathy or concomitant ethics. Engaged in resistance cannot automatically be equated with ethical practice. These three examples demonstrate that, especially in the case of women, involvement came as a matter of necessity, rather than high principle. In fact, all the women discussed here were more inclined to see themselves as acting ethically within an informal situation than within the formalised framework of the resistance movement.

Conclusion

These videotestimonials may lack the intellectual sophistication and literary polish of influential writers such as Levi, but they are rich in reflection and capture a remarkable diversity of experience. They illustrate the value of oral history as a source for those trying to understand the world of individuals confronted with irreconcilable ethical dilemmas. By exemplifying «concrete action in the world» based on mutual relationships of caring, hence they confirm that under certain circumstances the «I-Thou» relationship as conceived by Buber could exist, in extremis, and so too the possibility


39 «Masza», Interview (Melbourne, Australia: Jewish Holocaust Centre, 1993), DVD. «Masza's» account can be compared with that of «Marian» discussed in Pam MACLEAN, «Transforming the Holocaust into an Adventure in Videotestimony: An Unexpected Form of Discourse», Quaderns de Filologia (forthcoming). «Marian» escaped to the forests to join the partisans towards the end of the war. The primary motivation for his involvement appears to have been revenge for the persecution he suffered, rather than a commitment to the common good.

40 CHARMÉ, «The Two I-Thou Relations», 172.
of ethical behaviour. A family culture of mutual respect and caring paved the way in a number of cases for ethical behaviour, a culture that was replicated in the camps. Unexpectedly, resistance did not seem to figure largely in shaping ethical behaviour. Acts of «daily virtue» which involved the recognition of the humanity of Jews (by Jews and non-Jews alike), signal that humanity was possible in the face of Nazi dehumanisation, and so too was ethics.