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## **Questions of Filiation: From the Scrolls of Auschwitz to *Son of Saul***

Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams

### **Introduction: Remembering Birkenau**

*Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*) is the progeny of multiple forms of testimony – written, oral, photographic – produced by members of the Sonderkommando (SK) during the Holocaust and in its aftermath. László Nemes, the film’s director, has claimed that a major source of its inspiration was *Des voix sous la cendre* (Voices beneath the Ashes) (Bensoussan *et al.*, 2001). This book includes French translations of Yiddish writings by members of the Sonderkommando originally collected and published by the Polish historians Ber and Esther Mark as *Megiles Oyshvits* (the Scroll of Auschwitz) (Mark, 1977).<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Megan Ratner, Nemes reveals that, when working on *Son of Saul*, as well as the SK writings he recommended his cast read Gideon Greif’s *We Wept Without Tears*, which includes lengthy quotations from the writings and also interviews with survivors (Ratner, 2016: 61). Nemes also acknowledges the influence of the Sonderkommando photographs, four pictures taken by a Greek Jew known as Alex (possibly Alberto Errera) who was a member of the SK, upon his visual conception of Birkenau (62). Finally, Philippe Mesnard, an authority on the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando, was a consultant for the film. In what follows, we will focus predominantly on the ways in which Nemes takes up themes present in the writings and photographs.

*Des voix sous la cendre*, the text through which Nemes seemingly first learnt about some of the experiences of the Sonderkommando, does not contain all the extant SK writings. It includes all the writings originally collated by Ber Mark: a lengthy composition and a letter by Zalman Gradowski, a series of shorter writings by Leyb Langfus published together as ‘In groyl fun retsikhe’ (‘The Horrors of Murder’), and a history of the SK revolt by Zalman Lewental, together with his commentary on a diary written in the Łódź ghetto. It also provides extracts from Gradowski’s other major composition *In harts fun gehenem* (*In the Heart of Hell*) (Gradowski, c1977). It omits Langfus’s major work *Der Geyresh* (*The Deportation*) and the letters of Chaim Herman and of Marcel Nadjary, although it does mention the existence of all these other writings in the preface. In an interview conducted by Mathilde Blottière, Nemes and his co-screenwriter Clara Royer discuss the influence of *Des voix sous la cendre* in terms that suggest Nemes was strongly influenced by Gradowski’s *In the Heart of Hell* (Blottière, 2015). Nemes refers to having read subjective testimony which carries the readers inside the head of

someone manning the ovens in the crematorium and which narrates ‘*le cœur de l’enfer*’ [the heart of hell].<sup>2</sup> Nemes goes on to state that the central character of Saul (whose quest to bury an adolescent boy he identifies as his son forms the film’s central narrative) sprang from a single sentence in one of the manuscripts. Blottière asks which one and Royer interjects declaring that she cannot remember the sentence word for word but it refers to a member of the Sonderkommando finding his son in a pile of corpses and deciding he must bury him.

There is not actually anything directly matching this explanation present in the SK writings. In an interview with Gideon Greif, however, Ya’akov Gabai describes encountering two of his cousins on their way to be murdered in the gas chambers. After their cremation, Gabai gathered their ashes separately, buried them in cans and then said Kaddish. It is clear from his account that this is a practice that other members of the SK also adopted for murdered members of their families (Greif, 2005: 191). Gabai also discusses the common fear of coming across relatives among the corpses from the gas chambers (205). Royer may have linked testimony such as Gabai’s with the SK writings, some of which do discuss the murder of boys. Langfus’s composition ‘The 600 Boys’, for example, provides a powerful account of the murder of a group of Jewish boys, mainly teenagers. Langfus is struck by their physical condition: ‘The children looked so beautiful, so radiant and so well built that they shone out from their rags’ (Mark, 1977: 362).<sup>3</sup>

The boy in *Son of Saul* is sometimes filmed in ways that suggests a similar sense of physical purity, particularly in a scene of ritual washing which we will analyse later. There are also references in some of the SK manuscripts such as Langfus’s and Gradowski’s to the murder of immediate family. It seems then that Royer’s memory of the story in the SK writings is actually a composite of survivor testimony and the content of the writings. Royer’s recall is imperfect and reveals how memory is dynamic and changeable. Sigmund Freud (1961 [1924]) viewed memory as palimpsestic involving a process of continual overlaying and permanent preservation. The reality, however, is that at least some kinds of personal memories are subject to revision and change. Since the publication of Frederic Bartlett’s book *Remembering* (1932) there has been recognition that human memory is a constructive process rather than a series of encodings of singular events. Royer’s recollection seems to illustrate this fact.

## **Memory in the Frame**

The SK revolt of 7th October 1944, an event which registers prominently in *Son of Saul*, features in oral testimony that has been central to debates about the relationship between memory, oral testimony and history. In *Testimony*, Dori Laub uses an account of the uprising as an example during a discussion of oral testimony and its relationship to historical truth (1992: 59). Laub recounts the differing perspectives of historians and psychoanalysts towards a description of the revolt by a woman survivor from the Kanada-kommando. Laub states she recounted seeing ‘four chimneys going up in flames, exploding’ (59). In reality, only crematorium IV, with its solitary chimney, was set on fire and badly damaged during the uprising. This factual error causes historians who subsequently watch the woman’s testimony at a conference to reject its usefulness. Laub summarises their response: ‘since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept – nor give credence to – her whole account of events’ (59-60).

Laub, as psychoanalyst, takes an opposing view, suggesting that the number of chimneys ‘mattered less than the fact of the occurrence’ as ‘the event itself was almost inconceivable’ (60). The fiction of exploding chimneys becomes a datum of feeling, a kind of factual information relating to emotional impact. His interpretation is lent support by the testimony of Krystyna Żywulska, a Jewish inmate working in the camp offices, who witnessed the fire and stated that she had been ‘hypnotised’ by the burning building such was ‘the symbolic significance of the event’ (cited in Greif & Levin, 2015: 231). Like Laub’s anonymous interlocutor, for Żywulska the attack on the crematorium ‘broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz’ in which resistance was impossible (Laub, 1992: 60). For Laub, the anonymous woman who testifies does not simply recount an act of resistance, her account also performs a kind of resistance: ‘she is breaking out of Auschwitz even by her very talking’ (62). In this context, ‘the empirical number of the chimneys’ is not the key aspect of the account. What is crucial is the account’s function as resistance (62). ‘It is not merely her speech’, Laub claims, ‘but the very boundaries of silence which surround it, which attest, today as well as in the past, to this assertion of resistance’ (62).

Subsequently, Laub’s own account of this act of testimony has been questioned for its lack of factual accuracy. In the chapter ‘Frames of Reception’ in *Witnessing Witnessing*, Thomas Trezise suggests the woman whose testimony Laub describes is not actually a solitary individual but ‘arguably a composite figure based on the videotaped testimonies of at least three different

women, certain of whose features are exaggerated, transformed, or largely invented' (2013: 11).<sup>4</sup> Laub has, therefore, engaged in what Trezise calls 'creative misremembering' (26). The woman whose testimony seems to be the main influence on Laub, for instance, refers only to the crematoria and does not specifically mention chimneys. Trezise, who viewed the videotape of her testimony, also detected mismatches between her actual and reported demeanour. For Trezise, Laub engages in mythmaking, making things up, inventing silences in survivor testimony where there are none (26-27). He describes Laub's exploration of the nature of oral testimony through the account of the SK revolt as possessing a succinctness and simplicity that 'lend it the aura of a fable' (9). He takes umbrage at Laub's failure to get his facts right, to verify his recollection against the videotape, the material support upon which the voice and image of the survivor is inscribed and preserved, stating that 'nothing prevented Laub from reviewing the tapes of these interviews' (26). Laub was given the opportunity to respond to the article in which Trezise initially voiced his criticisms and, while virulently disagreeing with some of Trezise's assertions, did acknowledge that the account he gave of the interview was written from memory and that he had (mis)remembered it (2009: 128 & 133). Royer's story of the genesis of *Son of Saul* may similarly be described as an instance of misremembering.

### **Memory and Narrative**

Although Trezise raises important questions in relation to the reliability of Laub's summary of the production and reception of the account describing the SK revolt, we would suggest that Laub's conception of testimony is still insightful when examining *Son of Saul* as a form of bearing witness to the Holocaust. Laub's attentiveness to the way survivor testimony forms a weave of memory and narrative is particularly helpful for efforts to trace ways in which *Son of Saul* demonstrates parallels with the Scrolls of Auschwitz. These parallels manifest not solely in relation to specific content, characters and themes, but also at the level of form. As part of his response to Trezise's critique, Laub refers to the 'narrative *gestalt*' that emerges through oral testimony (2009: 139). The narrative gives form to memory. This means the testimony as a whole is other to the memory that prompts its emergence: it is memory that has been provided with a scaffold. The story has a containing function, enabling the fragments of a survivor's memory to hold together. Trezise also accepts that for facts to make sense, to signify, narrative is necessary (17). It is the process of

witnessing by which memories find support that leads Laub to assert that ‘testimony is not a ready-made text’ (2009: 140). Memory is not found but repeatedly made. Laub is here referring to oral testimony but the process he describes is also clearly evident in the *Scrolls of Auschwitz*.

In *Matters of Testimony*, for example, drawing on Hayden White’s ideas, we trace how Lewental engages in ‘emplotment’ to write his history of the SK revolt (Chare & Williams, 2016: 138-9). It is, however, Gradowski’s dramatic narrative account of a transport from the Kielbasin transit camp to Auschwitz that corresponds closest structurally to *Son of Saul*. In this testimony, Gradowski uses a spectral figure as a narrator. This figure is able to move around the camp at Kielbasin and through the train carriages on their way to Auschwitz thereby offering the reader a broader, more comprehensive, perspective than it would be humanly possible to achieve. Saul’s quest to bury the dead boy comprises a comparable technique in that it enables *Son of Saul* to show what it would otherwise be close to impossible for an individual member of the SK to see, namely many aspects of the killing process in a short amount of time: undressing, gassing, cremation, the scattering of ashes, even an SS office, a medical room and the *Effektenlager* (known colloquially as Kanada). Over a period of time squad members such as David Olère witnessed most aspects of the death factory but usually prisoners were confined to only a few tasks at any one moment. Saul though, like Gradowski’s narrator, is able to lead us to ‘observe everything and penetrate everywhere’ (Mark, 1977: 292). Gradowski’s narrator offers to glide with the reader on the wings of a steel eagle, using binoculars (*‘mikroskopische briln’*, which could also perhaps be translated as ‘microscopic lenses’) (292) to attain a continent-wide overview of mass murder. Through the invisible presence of the camera that shadows Saul, we share some aspects of this overview, his unique quest permitting a visual synopsis of genocide.

Because Laub produces a composite witness, Trezise refers to him in condemnatory terms as someone whose “‘testifying woman” appears to have come into being through a process quite similar to the way in which writers of fiction construct the characters peopling their novels or short stories’ (26). The process of scriptwriting adopted by Nemes and Royer differs from Laub in that the story of Saul is fictional (even if Royer wants to root it in the reality of the testimonies that make up the *Scrolls*) whereas the description of the providing and reception of the video testimony discussing the SK revolt is presented as what happened, as fact. The film and the video testimony, fiction inflected by fact and fact inflected by Laub’s fictionalising tendencies, can nevertheless both be understood as narrative reconstructions of historical events, as can Gradowski’s account

of the transport, meaning all three might be used to raise questions about history, memory and truth. Each involves a writerly approach to bearing witness.

Gradowski privileged writing and perhaps we might say, by extension, narrative over photography as a means of bearing witness. He employs a camera as a negative metaphor to describe an act of witnessing in his account of the Kiełbasin transport (Mark, 1977: 291). Here, the camera as witness is mere technology, unfeeling, inhuman.<sup>5</sup> Writing is ethically superior, permitting warmth and understanding towards those whose fates it records. The camera fixes a moment whereas writing can flesh out a character or event. Gradowski therefore rejects the arguably pure objectivity of the camera in favour of a more subjective approach. For him, it is necessary to embrace literary creativity in order to adequately represent the horrors he has witnessed and to communicate them. Part of his creative approach includes extensive use of metaphor, including cinematic metaphors.

During *In the Heart of Hell*, for example, he refers to memory as akin to a film screening, saying of inmates remembering their former liberty: ‘A film plays before them of their years gone by, which have vanished forever, and their cruel reality appears, which floats before their eyes’ (Gradowski, c1977: 43). Like the film, to which it also seems partly opposed, their current experiences in Birkenau form an insubstantial vision. This indicates the otherworldliness of the death camp. The cruel reality of their lives somehow does not seem real. The choice of film as metaphor here shows that Gradowski’s attitude towards visual technology in relation to witnessing was complex. Film, however, differs from photography in that the former involves moving images, the latter still. Film can more easily be adapted to narrative aims, used to tell stories.<sup>6</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman refers to *Son of Saul* as very literary (2015: 40). For him, it possesses the qualities of an allegorical tale (41). As Aaron Kerner has pointed out, allegorical narrative invites interpretation from an audience in ways that documentary does not (2011: 115). *Son of Saul* as a form of remembrance therefore shares the labour of bearing witness. It is, we would argue, the film’s literariness which permits it to resist the potentially cold objectivity of the camera and embrace some of the qualities Gradowski clearly feels are key to acts of witnessing. Chief among these is the capacity to evoke and prompt feelings yet to contain these feelings by way of narrative techniques.

## **The Matter of Feelings**

The relationship between specific forms of technology and their capacities to bear witness unites Gradowski and Nemes. For Gradowski, pen and paper form the most suitable recording technology available to him. For Nemes, film is his preferred medium. He is, however, very specific about the kind of film he wishes to use. He chooses 35mm film stock over digital film in the belief it better enables him to touch the emotions of the audience, digital film being rejected as too clean, too sure (Didi-Huberman, 2015: 27). Didi-Huberman links this decision to a desire to get back to the photographic materiality of film stock [*du support argentique*], a materiality that betrays its presence through small particles of metallic silver that texture the photographic image, the film frame (27). This materiality, this grain, comprises a kind of visual noise. Visual impurity is central to *Son of Saul* and the film stock forms a seemingly important component of this. Nemes observes that using 35mm film stock was ‘the only means to preserve an instability in the images and therefore to film the world in an organic way’.<sup>7</sup>

One of the noteworthy differences between 35mm film and digital film is the shallower depth of field the former permits. Less depth of field leads to softer images (Malkiewicz & Mullen, 2005: 20). 35mm film also has a broad exposure latitude making it well suited to the tenebrous conditions of the inside of the crematoria that Nemes seeks to portray. The director seems to want to avoid hard edges yet retain an attention to detail in his imagery. The living quality he describes is, perhaps, to be found in the cultivated haziness 35mm can provide, one that parallels the fuzziness of human memory. The organicism Nemes seeks to perfect resonates with the blurriness of Alex’s photographs and the grime and stains that animate the Scrolls of Auschwitz in the original.<sup>8</sup> The organic quality the choice of 35mm film brings to *Son of Saul*, the looseness it engenders, works to foster intimacy with the film’s audience, inviting their involvement in a way a sharper, more easily readable image, might not, encouraging them to find sense and feeling rather than coolly imposing them.

One of the enduring myths about the SK is that they existed in a perpetual state of unfeelingness. In *Son of Saul* there are outward displays of emotion but these are usually angry, aggressive. Saul, for example, is, at various times, bumped, pushed, and thumped. His personal space is continually transgressed, violated. His response to these acts is usually indifference. He also occasionally engages in forceful grabbing, pushing, and shoving. Under close attention, however, which the enduring focus on him encourages, it becomes clear that his emotional palette

is much more complex. Like the authors of the *Scrolls*, he undoes the myths of the Sonderkommando as heartless automatons or as violent brutes. His distress at the plight of those murdered in the gas chambers is, for instance, indicated early on. The gentleness of his gestures as he helps victims to undress in the film's first sequence suggests that he is not entirely hardened to their suffering. He removes a hat from a head and places it on a hook, before turning back to acknowledge its wearer, and hangs up the coat and carefully unbuttons the shirt of a bearded religious man, albeit while refusing or unable to meet his gaze. Here, Saul's downcast eyes seem in part to be a mark of shame, but they can also be read as a granting of respect, not looking at him in a state of partial undress and vulnerability. As Saul stands against a wall in the undressing room of the crematorium listening to people in the gas chambers screaming and crying for help, his head, initially upright, drops after a period of time. He moves from staring straight ahead to looking down, to looking downcast. His pain is muted, minimally revealed, but clearly not absent. Mass murder, despite its being an everyday event for him, is not something Saul is fully habituated to, reconciled with.

This minimal gesture is repeated subsequently when Saul is searching for the murdered boy's corpse near the ovens. At one point his face is illuminated by the glow of an oven, flickering light caused by the flames playing across his face. He turns away and when he turns back the door has been closed. Saul stands looking at the closed door, at the camera, expressionless. After some time his head drops slightly. This moment of reflection again reveals a suppressed but persistent upset at the tragedy that surrounds him. The camera in this scene is positioned at the heart of hell which, for Gradowski, was the burning of bodies. In a sense then it assumes the position of Gradowski, embodies him. The camera, like Gradowski, sets out to 'show' the horrors of the death factory (Mark, 1977: 289).

Like Gradowski too, the film makes efforts to show without doing violence, or unnecessary violence, to the victims. The technique of refusing to individualise victims through filming them out of focus, veiling them, or refusing to film their faces is clearly bound up with a concern to show this horror without making it nakedly immediate. There is, of course, a psychological element to the use of focus. It indicates Saul's cutting himself off from what occurs around him. When he is shown paying attention to events further away from him, the background does come into focus. However, it is also important to acknowledge its ethical dimension. The lack of peripheral vision provides a means to circumvent difficulties that accompany Holocaust cinema

such as voyeurism and objectification. The blurring can even be read as performing a kind of fidelity to the archive, providing a way to instantiate gaps in our knowledge, our memory of events, which are similar in their figurative potential to the literal gaps in the testimonies of the SK manuscripts. The out of focus aspects of *Son of Saul* permit something of the traumatic nature of events to be preserved alongside the narrative without being subsumed by it.

Of the victims, only the boy is given an anonymous identity. He becomes a figure of substance for the audience. His being made to matter for us is, we would suggest, another crucial way in which the influence of the Scrolls of Auschwitz upon *Son of Saul* is expressed. The boy's importance is signalled from early in the film: he is the tragic miracle that attracts Saul's attention, surviving a gassing against all the odds only to be subsequently suffocated by an SS officer. Even in death, the boy continues to be Saul's centre of attention. With much difficulty, he retrieves the corpse and smuggles it to his living space. Later, in a key scene, he brings a self-identified 'rabbi' (whom the shooting script names as 'Braun')<sup>9</sup> into this curtained-off space to attend to the boy, getting water so the body can be ritually washed. 'The child', he whispers in Yiddish. 'I hid him'. As Saul turns his head to look at Braun, the camera refocuses from his profile in silhouette onto the figure in the background, his eyes closed, slumped against the wall. Switching to Hungarian, Saul murmurs: 'you'll tell me what to do.' He stands, places the bowl of water next to the boy's body, removes his hat and wrings out the cloth in the bowl. The shot dwells on his face, the right side highlighted by the warm glow of a lamp, as he looks down. After nearly ten seconds of stillness, he uncovers the boy and begins to wash him. We hear the dribble of water into the bowl, the sound of the cloth gently rubbing on the boy's chest. Underneath, there is the slow boom of the chimney flues, the clanking of machinery, strangely dislocated whispers in Polish. Saul has enough time to wash the child's chest, and then one arm to the tips of his fingers, before he is interrupted by Russian conspirators demanding the package of explosives that he was supposed to fetch.

By speaking to the 'rabbi' in a language which he cannot understand, Saul seems to indicate that he knows Braun may not even be awake. But even at their first meeting, Saul tells him 'you will help me to bury my son' in Hungarian, and so never explains his role to him comprehensibly. Rather than deferring to someone else's knowledge of ritual, he seems to be defining the rules of the ritual himself. Rabbi Frankel of the group has already told him what he needs to do, Abraham that a rabbi is not needed to bury the dead. Other prisoners see, quite

rightly, that Braun is not a rabbi. Removing his hat seems to be a gesture of respect, but one that is more appropriate for Christian than Jewish practice. This is an improvised and contested ritual, one that has been created out of Saul's own compulsions as much as in conformity to any particular law, and, importantly, one that puts him at odds with the collective.

Saul gives himself the space and time to feel something here, even if for less than a minute. It gives him the possibility of an individual existence, along with all of the problems that that involves: the dangers to his life and others' that he has already undergone, and the risks of ridicule, incomprehension and contempt from the other prisoners. Indeed, as well as cutting himself off in space, he cuts himself off in time, living almost in a different timeline from everyone else, with no shared memories. He claims that Abraham did not use to like him (and I still don't, says Abraham) – the implication being that Saul thinks it has changed. He says that he has no memory of talking about women, or of Ella Fried, the woman who he meets in 'Kanada'. The adoption of the son is the only continuity with the past that he asserts, one that no one else believes.

We can see some similarity here between Saul's need to compartmentalise his life and the way that the writers of the Sonderkommando found means to create and reflect on spaces in which personal feelings became more possible. In a manuscript to which he gave the title *The Deportation*, Leyb Langfus, who was a rabbinic judge from the town of Maków Mazowiecki,<sup>10</sup> tells the story of how the Jews of his hometown were deported and murdered in Auschwitz in December 1942. Among those killed were his wife Dvoyre and son Shmuel. Langfus is the sole member of the Sonderkommando to have written about the death of a child in Auschwitz, but he gives that fact in just one brief, anguished sentence towards the end of his manuscript. The only other place where he discusses his family is a passage – actually set aside as a chapter – early on in the text, after the deportation has been announced. Within this space, he is able to express his feelings – overwhelming, dangerous feelings – for his son, and for his wife. One of those feelings is of utter impotence, of being unable to save his son.

My son's words rang in my ears: 'Daddy, I want to live, do everything you can so that I can stay alive. What can be done – I want to live so much.' I stood by my child's bed and studied every lineament of his face. I scrutinised the curve of his brow, his nose, ears, and even the nails on his hands. In case my fate will be sealed and we will have to

part, whether living or dead, I must now give my eyes their fill of his features, so he will stay forever before my eyes. [...]. An unquenchable pain and deepest hopelessness took hold of me and I bodied forth my great, terrible tragedy in one slow, broken sound, interrupted by deep sighs, of one single word that contained the entire horror of my fate: ‘Shmuel, my little Shmuel,’ which I cried out endlessly long.<sup>11</sup>

Leyb attends to the body of his sleeping son, trying to fix him in his memory but also to pay a kind of respect to his physical existence, to attend to every single detail, down to the nails on his hands. The only benefit that this attentiveness might provide to Shmuel is to honour his memory, to preserve a vision of his child that Leyb will be able to see after the boy’s death. By writing this down, Langfus provided a way to preserve his son, to keep his name and the body to which it was attached, in a form whereby other people might also have some vision of him. As Langfus wrote this, his son was dead. We can imagine him drawing on the memory that he had fixed in himself in order to be able to write. This writing then was itself a kind of ritual by which the dead could be honoured and remembered. And so it is not at all dissimilar from the attentiveness with which Saul, very briefly, washes the body of the boy.

This situation also produces an affective reaction which is beyond Leyb’s control. But as he reflected on, and no doubt partly relived, those feelings, Langfus found a means to manage them. He found a space in which they could be expressed – a chapter in his account, set aside for dealing with this subject, before he could return to the story of the whole town of Maków. This space was created through aesthetic means: dividing his writing into chapters with titles and creating a narrative structure for his story, not simply writing different diary entries or separating them by turning to a new page. The book itself in which he wrote could also be described as a space in which certain thoughts and feelings were allowed to be felt. And that book too was written within a particular space, probably that of the bunk in which he slept.

That at least is the story told by one of the Dragon brothers, saying that they had to arrange for the writers to be based in a bunk with light (Greif, 2005: 165). According to Shlomo Dragon, Langfus was stationed in the same bunk as Zalman Gradowski, who actually wrote about the bunk (which he calls ‘der buks’, a Polish Yiddish version of the German ‘Box’ – stall) as also a space in which religious observance, including study of the Talmud, could be maintained, and where emotions, particularly of loss, could be given some acknowledgement.

Gradowski describes the stall as a mother veiled in mourning crying for the children that have been torn from her (Gradowski, c1977: 129). The curtain here, the means of separating one space from another, is figured as something that shields the grief of its occupant while also signalling it. Hidden behind the curtain as veil or sackcloth, as token of mourning, members of the SK are able to remember, to feel, and, seemingly, to lament.

The stall, which now represents (*farkerpert in zikh*) your home, your family, your wife, your child, the only happiness and pleasure still left for you in your hell-world.

The stall, which is like a heart full of feeling, which is the one and only thing left in the world, in this world of crime, murder and barbarism, in this world of dulled human emotions. (*Ibid.*)

Like Langfus, Gradowski uses the literary means available to him to carve out a space, the anaphoric, incantatory form marking out a structure within which to discuss feeling – not quite his own, raised to a higher poetic level, and never quite owned, but perhaps more explicitly about him here than anywhere else in his writings.

The stall – each of them is a mother in itself. If you draw nearer to her you hear her weeping voice. She shows you photographs of her beloved children to whom you were a brother and have now vanished forever. (*Ibid.*)

Family photographs are images that allow a connection with the past. The photographs stand for those who are absent, acknowledging a lack of connection with them, but also allowing Gradowski to see these figures as brothers. The stall is the family space where filiation is recalled and preserved, as well as invented. It allows creative acts quite similar to the ritual invented by Saul in order to assert his responsibility for the child.

These feelings are both a relief and an extreme danger. Going into the dreams of different prisoners, Gradowski describes one dreaming of a happy past with his family until he is woken by the bell. Another prisoner partly relives and partly has a vision of what happened to his family, seeing them stripped naked, exposed to the cold and assaults of dogs, surrounded by laughing men, and when he wants to run to help he cannot. ‘It is as if he is held, his hands and

feet bound, he cannot move' (134). Here is the common sensation in a dream of being unable to move, but it also stands for the fact of a prisoner's powerlessness, being deprived of agency. All he can do is witness.

### **The Anxiety of Agency**

In his litany of the stalls, Gradowski again shows a desire to move everywhere and know everything, even to the extent of knowing other men's dreams. As we have suggested above, Saul's quest also has a similar narrative and expository function to Gradowski's ability to move from one carriage on a train to another or even to survey the entirety of Europe and observe the devastation being wreaked upon its Jews. For Gradowski, we have argued that this possibility is based in his own sense of himself as a ghost, as already dead (Chare & Williams, 2016: 66-68). In Saul's case, this drive too is rooted in death: his sense of obligation to the dead and renunciation of the living, a need to give a child the last rites, but pursued at the expense of all other characters in the film. The whole 'quest' is carried out at an unbearable pace, which sets the viewer on edge, making it hard to identify with what is happening as he is pushed and pulled around by conspirators, Kapos and SS-men. In many ways his death-fixated desire is as much beyond his conscious control as these other forces that buffet him from scene to scene. It is a kind of agency, one that gives him a goal towards which he moves, swimming through the maelstrom of bodies, carried by its current at times, seizing the chance to strike out on his own at others.<sup>12</sup> But it is an agency directed to the benefit of no one, and he seems unable to change its direction. It is agency without mastery. In this sense, Nemes and Royer found a way of telling a Holocaust story, which relies on a character being able to act, while also staying true to the insight exemplified by Gradowski's description of the dream: that the prisoners were essentially powerless.

One of the few times when his agency seems to give him a chance to be something other than driven relentlessly is the point where he washes the child. In contrast to the oppressive and all-encompassing soundscape of machinery, shouts and screams and the constant burning of fires, here there is a space of quiet. In the scene the morning after Saul has been washing the boy, only a few sounds penetrate into this space. As he delicately trims off Braun's beard, birdsong and a voice engaged in prayer can be heard alongside the snip of the scissors. These sounds

emphasise the calm, delineate the stillness that Saul has managed to achieve, because they only gently intrude upon it. They form the exterior that helps to define the interior. In the case of the prayer, it seems also to define how much his own rituals stand at a distance from the religious practices of his fellow prisoners, as meaningless to him as birdsong. Gradowski too writes of hearing religious Jews studying religious texts (1977: 130), but with much greater understanding, and with a sense of it as an identifying characteristic of one type of fellow prisoners, alongside different characteristics exhibited by the inhabitants of other stalls. He is able to connect with these men through the distinct sounds that come from each stall, ones that he asserts make a harmony together. In Gradowski's version, each isolated stall is connected to the others, heard to be in accord with them. In *Son of Saul*, the connections seem far less convivial. Voices are either shouts or whispers, and in the latter case often feel unnaturally loud and unnaturally close, whilst also (because of the constant use of close up) being unlocatable.

This is not a question of Nemes and Royer being untrue to what Gradowski wrote. It is more a sign that Gradowski has to believe that these divisions can be overcome in order to have a sense of how communication with a reader outside the camp is possible. He writes of the stalls: 'from each of them invisible threads have been spun which have woven us together into an inseparable family of brothers' (1977: 130). Gradowski wants to be able to assert some kind of common emotional bond between the men that is bound up with a sense of continuity between the past and present and future. Everyone else in the Sonderkommando seems to be knowable to Gradowski. This is clearly something he needed to believe as a foundation for working together and resisting. But it might also be an indication of his writing in Yiddish, more or less the lingua franca of the camp, as *Son of Saul* too indicates.

In the film, prisoners frequently fail to communicate with each other, with Saul in particular unable to express himself in anything but the most rudimentary Yiddish, and Abraham frequently having to serve as his translator (into Yiddish and Russian). The Greeks in particular, but the Hungarians too, who did not know Yiddish, were left feeling isolated and not part of this group.<sup>13</sup> *Son of Saul* might be said then to be acknowledging something that Gradowski was not able to acknowledge, or perhaps even to see: the alienation experienced by some members of the SK and antagonism accompanying it. The group dynamics, as *Son of Saul* powerfully demonstrates, are less harmonious than Gradowski suggests. Wolfgang Sofsky cautions against thinking of a community of suffering as extant in the concentration camps and perhaps similar

prudence is required regarding the SK (1997: 162). It is also, however, possible that Gradowski's fantasy of harmony stems from a very real recognition of difference. He desires to find common cause in emotion, in a shared anger and grief that transcends linguistic differences and the tensions that they can cause, because he senses an underlying disunity.

Ultimately in *Son of Saul* it is emotion rather than reflection that brings the men together. The revolt is portrayed as involving significant preparation and planning, yet is shown to come to fruition haphazardly. Members of the SK, seeing that some of their fellow prisoners have been killed, join together in fear, anger and desperation to attack their guards. In this context, it is noteworthy that one of the only times that we hear Greek being spoken is in the moments before the rebellion, as they wait locked up together. Differences are acoustically registered to be cast aside, all the men uniting against a common enemy. On this level, perhaps, Gradowski's writings do resonate with the film's depiction of the revolt. Feelings become ties that bind disparate individuals. Our knowledge of the reality of the revolt as it unfolded is, however, sketchy. Its story as a considered collective endeavour is one that that comes mainly from Zalman Lewental's writings (Mark, 1977: 377-421; Chare & Williams, 2016: 125-153). But he was not witness to it. He was only able to record what he had heard subsequently, not what he had seen. He had to create continuity between this desperate uprising and the plans that had preceded it, not a false continuity, but one whose existence it suited his purposes to assert. For Lewental, the revolt, even if it failed to live up to his expectations for what it might achieve, was a culmination. For Saul, however, it is represented as more of an inconvenience. He is dragged (literally) into it. For most of the time it is a strange background through which he moves.

### **Conclusion: Creative Acts**

Saul's cutting himself off from the camp, and from the rest of the Sonderkommando, is less easy to commend than the open and armed resistance displayed by his fellow prisoners. But like the writing of the SK, it is a creative act, making a set of connections and separations as a way to resist the system of connection and separation that the camp regime enforces upon him. Connecting time and space, the camp administration produced the remorseless continuity of the killing process, and a uniform space which enabled the SS to surveil and control the camp. The regime also separated people from each other, deliberately mixing different language groups so

they could not communicate, separating them from their past by breaking them and forcing them to give up all the things that made them the subjects of their own lives, isolating them from the rest of the world. The connections and separations that Gradowski, and Langfus made are evidence of creativity as a form of resistance, finding ways to put a different order of meaning on their lives than that imposed by the camp. They turned the grim reality of which they were a part into a form that could hold what had happened, that they could bear to write down. They needed to connect with the outside and communicate the nature of their environment, but also to cut that environment off, to give themselves the space in which they could think and write. They also, in Gradowski and perhaps also Lewental's case, used creativity to elide differences within the group in order to imagine and enact collective resistance. Saul's creativity may seem more perverse, and more fraught with danger. He fails the living for the dead. But like the writers of the Sonderkommando, he finds ways to tell a story of himself that connects with the past, and to create spaces in which that story can be acted out.

The film is, of course, itself a creative act. It is a work of fiction. We would argue, however, that like the testimony of the woman as it is described by Laub, *Son of Saul*, as a scaffolding for the SK experience, possesses dimensions that are faithful to the memory of events. One of these dimensions is its recognition of the role of creativity within resistance. Saul embodies this element, as do Feigenbaum the writer and the nameless photographer. The revolt itself, in its improvised nature, is also shown to involve a kind of creativity. It is through the creation of the character of Saul that we are able to bear witness to these other varied creative dimensions. Saul, whose tale is based upon a story Royer remembers from the Scrolls, a story that does not actually exist, a story she has creatively misremembered. It is a failure of memory that, like the one Laub details, invents, permits a valuable kind of insight. The testimony Laub examines details the emotional responses generated by the revolt among prisoners other than the SK. Nemes and Royer, unswayed by such testimonies, provide a restrained depiction of the revolt. Their interest lies in the general emotions of the SK themselves. *Son of Saul*, a work of fiction, is able to provide a major historical corrective to received ideas of the SK as emotionless automatons. It creates a representation of the SK that shows fidelity to the complexity of their feelings.

Finding continuities between the writings of the Sonderkommando and the script and film by Royer and Nemes might also be described as a creative act. There are significant differences

between them, in medium, in conception and in the unimaginably different circumstances of production. Moreover, as we stated above, neither *The Deportation* nor Gradowski's text on the 'stalls' is included in *Des voix sous la cendre*, their key source. Our weaving them into a reading of the film might therefore even be called a piece of creative misremembering. But such a process is necessary. A serious engagement with the legacy of the Sonderkommando demands that we deploy all our creative and imaginative resources to find ways to explore not only their separation from us, but also the continuities between us, to feel our way into an emotional world that the writers among them believed they could share with their future readers. *Son of Saul* exemplifies, and invites, the possibility of that creative engagement.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The first translation of *Megiles Oyshvits* was published by Éditions Plon as *Des voix dans la nuit* (Mark, 1982). It went out of print and a new translation, which was published by Calmann-Lévy, was commissioned. See Mesnard (2015: 98).

<sup>2</sup> *Au cœur de l'enfer* (Gradowski, 2001) is the title given to the French translation of *In the Heart of Hell*.

<sup>3</sup> Our translation. All translations are ours unless otherwise stated.

<sup>4</sup> Trezise's chapter about Laub in *Witnessing Witnessing*, 'Frames of Reception,' is a version of an article, 'Between History and Psychoanalysis' that he published in *History and Memory* in 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Gradowski does, however, view some photographs as possessing a powerful memorial value. See, for example Chare's (2017) essay 'Holocaust Memory in a Post-Survivor World: Bearing Lasting Witness'.

<sup>6</sup> Photographs, especially when they form a series, can also be read in narrative terms. See, for instance, Chare's (2011: 141-150) discussion of the SK photographs.

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Tarik Khaldi (2015).

<sup>8</sup> See our discussion of the materiality of the Scrolls of Auschwitz in *Matters of Testimony* (2016: 30-59).

<sup>9</sup> This script is available at [http://www.sonyclassics.com/awards-information/screenplays/sonofsaul\\_screenplay.pdf](http://www.sonyclassics.com/awards-information/screenplays/sonofsaul_screenplay.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Langfus is a figure who seems to have been drawn upon for Rabbi Frankel in the film.

<sup>11</sup> Translation directly from the Yiddish manuscript in the Auschwitz archives.

<sup>12</sup> For a summary of differing conceptions of agency see Anne Garrat (2016).

<sup>13</sup> Braun, despite his name, seems to have been originally written as a Greek Jew. One of his few utterances in the script is to say in Greek 'I forgot' the words of the Kaddish.

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