

Diaries and Memoirs as a Historical Source - The Diary and Memoir of a Rabbi at the “Konin House of Bondage”

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Currently, there is a trend of thought that regards memoirs as predisposed to exaggeration and “beautification.” For example, Mendel Piekarz, in his article “On Testimony Literature as a Historical Source in the Prosecution of the ‘Final Solution,’” deals with textual differences between writings created during the Holocaust — such as those produced shortly before the defeat of Nazi Germany — and later texts. In Piekarz’s opinion, the latter writings reflect a sepia portrait as opposed to the acuity of the original, authentic experience, a withering of the powers of memory, and residues of more recent experience. “Consciously and unconsciously,” Piekarz writes, “the witnesses tend to overstep their personal experiences and constantly impregnate their remarks with new trends of thought.” He points to tendencies to harmonize, to delete negative descriptions, to prettify, and to insert “imitative accounts of martyrdom from the Middle Ages,” as typical of the later memoir literature.¹

These remarks may be true to some extent in certain contexts, but this literature surely does not deserve a sweeping, all-inclusive interpretation such as this. Differences in the degrees of clarity and reliability of human memories at different times result not only from fading recollections and residues of new experiences but also from the process in which strata of memory surface in different contexts and circumstances. To explicate this point, I shall present two documents from the archives of the Ghetto Fighters’ House and from Yad Vashem that are both fascinating and of singular research importance. Both are manuscripts, one a diary and the other a memoir, written by the same person — Rabbi Yehoshua Moshe Aharonson, who was expelled from

¹ Mendel Piekarz, “On Testimony Literature as a Historical Source in the Perpetration of the ‘Final Solution,’” *Kivunnim* 20 (August 1983) (Hebrew), pp. 129-157 (Piekarz, “Literature”).

Sanniki with the rest of his community; he accompanied them in their ordeal and was a source of both spiritual and moral support.

It is more than fascinating to juxtapose the two sources as they also give us a clear and sharp picture of what happened at the Konin camp. A thorough comparative study may also answer several questions that present themselves when only the diary is read, and it tests the reliability and validity of the memoir in its broad sense.

The Nature and Circumstances of Rabbi Y. M. Aharonson's Writings.

The Diary Section: "Scroll of the Konin House of Bondage" and Related Documents²

Konin was a labor camp established in the town of that name in western Poland; it was located in Konin county near Kalisz. The area belonged to the Warthegau, which Germany annexed when it occupied Poland in 1939. Konin had a vibrant Jewish community during the inter-war period. The Jews of Konin were expelled in late 1941, and the labor camp was established there in March 1942. More than 800 Jews were brought to the camp from nearby localities, including Sanniki.³ Most of the inmates were put to forced labor for

² Ghetto Fighters' House Archives, 3293/E 4 (GFHA). This file includes the documents attached to the diary and further testimonies, documents, and letters, including an article by the donor of the letters, Yisrael David Beit-Halevy, and the studies of Zvi Shner, who was the first to uncover this source and identify its author. The file was gathered and expanded by Eva Feldenkreis, who helped locate further material. Under the title, "The Documentation Enterprise of the Rabbi from Sanniki" (Shner, "Documentation Enterprise"), Zvi Shner revealed the diary, segments of "The Story of Koil," and "Scroll of the Konin House of Bondage." See *Ghetto Fighters' House News*, 4-5 (16-17) (September 1956), pp. 12-25 (*GFH News*). I consider this article a continuation of and complementary to the publication of Rabbi Aharonson's "documentation enterprise." The complete diary was published by Yehoshua Eibschitz in *Zakhor* (1981), pp. 17-49 (*Zakhor*), and recently in 'Aley Merorot (Bene Berak: published by the family, Summer 1996), which contains all of Rabbi Aharonson's writings on the Holocaust. The diary was re-proofed against the original, and the pagination used in this article corresponds to that in the book. The preface to the book (pp. 8-10) presents a detailed account of the provenance of the diary pages.

³ *Pinkas Hakehillot; Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities: Poland*, vol. I, *The Communities of Lodz and Its Region* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1976), pp. 235-238. About 40 percent of the Jews of Konin were deported at the onset of the Nazi occupation to Ostrowiec; the rest were banished in July 1940 and October 1941. They were taken to Grodziec and Rzgów—"rural ghettos" — and the nearby town of Zagórow, from where most of them were sent to the Lublin area via Lodz and murdered in 1942 in a forest near Józefów and in the Kazimierz forests; *ibid.*, p. 237. See also *Memorial Book Konin* (Tel Aviv: Association of Konin Jews in Israel, 1968) (Yiddish and Hebrew) (*Konin Book*), especially Shmuel Ben Zion

German firms and suffered horribly from the extreme brutality of the camp commander, Helmand Hausbrand, and his assistants. Most of the prisoners were transported in groups to the Chelmno death camp between the summer of 1942 and the spring of 1943, and the sixty or so who remained were sent to Auschwitz.

One of the inmates was Rabbi Yehoshua Moshe Aharonson, rabbi of Sanniki in Gostynin county, Warsaw district, and the scion of a famous extended rabbinical family. Aharonson, then in his thirties, was sent to Konin with the members of his congregation and other Jews in his district. Together with them he experienced grueling labor, starvation, humiliation, and lethal abuse, but he regarded himself as an unmitigated partner in the fate of his fellow inmates. His sense of history and the credence he gave to information that had reached the camp about the murder of Jews in Chelmno prompted him to document what was happening to his congregants in Konin. His specific intention was that their plight not be forgotten to the end of eternity.

Aharonson also co-opted the Jewish leaders of the camp to his mission, and they took part in this clandestine activity by providing paper and ink, by protecting his enterprise from discovery, and by helping to conceal the material in a hidden drawer. When the danger mounted, Aharonson transferred the writing project to the camp morgue. He persevered for about a year and a half, from March 1942 until late August 1943, within several days of the liquidation of the camp. In view of the circumstances, he wrote very succinctly and, at times, referred to matters by allusion only.

Rabbi Aharonson wrote two pieces in addition to the diary, "essays" of sorts on two themes, which he attached to the diary pages. One of these works was "The Story of Koil" (the Jewish name for the town of Kolo, the district capital close to the Chelmno camp, where the transports disembarked): a detailed exposé of information on the gassings at Chelmno, as reported by an escapee from that camp, coupled with information obtained in other ways. This

Mottl, "The Uprising in the Konin Camp," pp. 622-624. See also Theo Richmond, *Konin, a Quest* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) (Richmond, *Konin*).

document was written in 1942.⁴ The second essay, “Why We Did Not Fight for Our Lives,” discusses the issue of the Jewish response to the events: why the Jews eschewed physical resistance in the ghettos and the camps and why there were few suicides. These matters may have been written in the form of separate essays because, unlike the diary, they do not document what happened at the Konin camp. The author discussed the issue of physical resistance and committed it to writing because he sensed that the question would surface in the future.

I believe it correct to explain at the outset the question that the coming generations of researchers will ask: Why did we not fight for our lives [and] avenge the angels of death who had come to take us to the valley of the deepest darkness?⁵

Deposited in a hidden trunk were also detailed lists, with the names of everyone who had perished in the Konin camp, either by starvation or by deportation to Chelmno⁶ and two original documents written concurrently and concealed in the same way: the testaments of two Jewish leaders in the camp, Feibish Kamlazh and Avraham Zajf.⁷ These documents are as valuable as the diary as primary source material.

Several days before the Konin camp was liquidated, the rabbi and his colleagues sought a way to remove the writings from the camp for safekeeping. The diary and the documents attached to it were concealed in

⁴ GFHA 3293/E 4 and *'Aley Merorot*, p. 122. The document was first published by Zvi Shner , “Documentation Enterprise.”

⁵ GFHA 3293/E 4 and *'Aley Merorot*, p.122. The document was first published in *GFH News*, 5-6 (April 1954), pp. 26-27.

⁶ The original document is in the possession of the family and was first published in *Zakhor*; *'Aley Merorot*, pp. 323-331. As I formed a close relationship with members of the author’s family, I discovered further writings from the end of the war up to the author’s death in 1993. It is both enriching and interesting to compare these later writings, too; their circumstances and dates are important elements in such a comparison.

⁷ GFHA 3293/E 4 and *'Aley Merorot*, appendixes, pp. 320-322. Avraham Zajf’s letter, written on August 12, 1943, was first published in *Dappim le-heker ha-shoah*, Collection A (January-April 1951), pp. 170-172. Feibish Kamlazh’s will was translated and first published in shner, “Documantation Enterprise”, p. 25. The letters were evidently sent to the Pole to whom the diary was given for safekeeping. On the basis of the addresses given him by the two authors, Zajf’s letter reached his sister-in-law, Dr. Celina Stutter of Haifa, and was also addressed to his sister, Miriam Bloch.

crates and left with a local Catholic Pole who had worked with them in the camp carpentry. Another copy was entrusted to Max Steinheker, a German who had offered his assistance as a Communist sympathizer. In return, Steinheker asked the author to write remarks of commendation on the copy given to him, for use as “character testimony” in time of need. After the war, the survivors were unable to locate the recipients of the writings, which thus seemed to have been lost. However, the diary pages made their way to Israel in a complex and lengthy fashion, one by one. Most of them reached the archives of the Ghetto Fighters’ House; others found their way to the rabbi and are kept by members of his family. The documentation operation in Konin, in the words of Zvi Shner, was “a reflection of the psychological strength, sense of history, and devotion of the rabbi who authored these writings, his colleagues in the historians’ task, and the organizers of the clandestine archives in the large ghettos.”⁸

The Memoir Section⁹

Frustrated and anguished at the loss of the diary, Rabbi Aharonson decided to rewrite the chronicle shortly after he was liberated, while still at the Bad Gastein DP camp in Austria. The memoir was completed in 1946. (According to his wife’s testimony, it had been written by the time they married in 1947.) In 1947 or 1948, he sent a copy of the memoir to an organization in Austria that was gathering documentary material; he proofed the writings and added several comments. Attempting to remain true to the facts and avoid embellishments, he asked two of his fellow victims to attach their accounts to his own. Aharonson’s especially vivid memory, along with the proximity of the writing to the events, allowed him to reconstruct the account down to its minutest details. The original memoir pages remained in the family’s possession; an identical copy is in the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem.

⁸ Shner, “Documentation Enterprise,” p. 27.

⁹ Yehoshua Moshe Aharonson, *Memoirs*, manuscript (Yiddish), Yad Vashem Archives (YVA) M-I/E - 2529. For the purpose of this article, the material was examined in the original, which was sometimes cited for the sake of precision. The pagination noted is usually from the book *Aley Merorot*. The translator, Yehoshua Eibschitz, one of the most prominent documenters of religious Jewry during the Holocaust and the editor of *Zakhor*, was a personal friend of the author’s. His translation was of much assistance to me.

The memoir includes a unique document: a list of *nisyonot* (tests or challenges) in arbitership in *Halakha* (Jewish religious law) and ethical issues. Aharonson's responsibilities as a rabbi, foremost in the application of halakhic rules for the governance of community life, took on harsh significance in the labor camp, and the reverberations of this matter intermingle with the horrific stories related in the diary and the memoir. However, the rabbi devoted a separate essay to halakhic and moral issues that he found extremely daunting. The term he applied to them, *nisyonot*, reflects not only his sensitivity to his comrades who presented him with these dilemmas, but also the way he perceived himself, for every halakhic decision under these circumstances was a personal ordeal. Although the issues are set forth very tersely, they refer to the halakhic discretion applied. In this sense, it is important to compare them with other Responsa material, especially the collection by Rabbi Ephraim Oshry.¹⁰

Aharonson's list of *nisyonot* is undated. According to his wife's testimony, it was written at approximately the time of the memoir; the paper and the handwriting corroborate this. The *nisyonot* discussed here are only in the context of the Konin segments.

The "Philosophical" Section

Aharonson's halakhic books and other writings in the possession of his family take up various philosophical issues in the context of the Holocaust. Examples are in the preface to his book *Yeshuat Moshe*¹¹ and in the book itself, in religious essays in manuscript on the Torah and the Book of Esther, in articles in memorial books, in a letter to the *rebbe* of Slonim, and in memorial remarks about martyrs of the Holocaust. These writings date from Aharonson's stay among the survivor groups, where he served first as the chief rabbi of the Association of Rabbis in Austria and later as rabbi of refugee congregations in Germany, through his years in the rabbinate in Israel (in Petah Tikvah and Emmanuel), until his death in 1993.

¹⁰ Ephraim Oshry, *Book of Responsa Mi-Ma'amakim* ("Out of the Depths") (New York: privately published, 1959-1980), 5 vols. (Hebrew). An abridged version was published in English, as *Responsa from the Holocaust* (New York: Judaica Press, 1983).

¹¹ Yehoshua Moshe Aharonson, *Yeshuat Moshe* (Tel Aviv, 1967), preface.

The philosophical writings deal with important issues in Jewish thought through the prism of the experiences Rabbi Aharonson had endured: the meaning of suffering; the significance of life, exile, and redemption; the Land of Israel; and martyrs, to name only a few. We refer to these writings in this article only insofar as they parallel the sections on Konin in the diary and the memoirs.

The Konin Diary and the Konin Memoir — A Comparison

At this rare opportunity to compare two unique sources, a diary and a memoir, written by the same person and depicting the same period of time, we should address ourselves to several points of general comparison that may bring the documents into clearer focus and examine how approximate, complementary, and inseparable they are.

Setting: The diary spans an eighteen-month period of time, from March 8-9, 1942, to the last date known to us — Sivan 5703 (early summer of 1943). The last few months' events are written with great brevity on one page. The manuscript in our possession is missing pages 17-19, which pertain to the period between late October 1942 and January 1943, and the last pages of the diary. Some of the related documents were written in late Av 5703 (summer of 1943). The memoir, in contrast, covers most of the war years: from September 1939, after the occupation of his town, Sanniki, to the liquidation of the Auschwitz III concentration camp (Buna-Monowitz) in 1945. Therefore, the two documents are also different in the range of locations covered. The diary is exactly what its author called it —“Scroll of the Konin House of Bondage”; it relates almost exclusively to the author's experiences in this camp. In his memoir, the author advances from stop to stop: Sanniki; wanderings in Lodz, Warsaw, and the small towns; the transport to Konin; Konin itself; the Hohensalza penal camp; and the Auschwitz III concentration camp. For this reason, our comparison of the writings will pertain only to those parts of the memoir that correspond to the diary, i.e., those concerning Konin. *The characteristics of the writing* are also different. The diary was originally written in fluent Hebrew, the phrasing is usually terse and succinct, and much use is made of acronyms and abbreviations. The memoir is written in Yiddish;

the author's language is rich, complex, and spiced with folk expressions. The memoir sometimes uses an ironic tone. In both writings, especially the memoir, the language is peppered with expressions from Jewish sources and with idioms.

The comparison that follows pertains chiefly to the diary and the segments on Konin in the memoir. In this comparison, three groups can be discerned:

1. Matters in which the diary and the memoir correspond almost fully.
2. Matters in which the memoir adds or changes something relative to the diary.
3. Matters mentioned only in the memoir although they occurred in Konin during the time of the diary.

Matters in Which the Diary and the Memoir Correspond Almost Fully

The information on Chelmno, delivered while the author was still in Sanniki, appears almost identically in both sections. In the diary, a detailed document called "The Story of Koil" is devoted to this matter. This is one of the first documentary testimonies during the Holocaust about Chelmno, the first extermination camp in Poland. The information came from an escapee from Chelmno, Michal Podchlebnik.¹² The document also reports the public's

¹² Podchlebnik survived the Holocaust and testified at the Eichmann trial. See his testimony in Israel Ministry of Justice, *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann; Record of the Proceedings in the District Court of Jerusalem*, 9 vols. (Jerusalem: The Trust for the Publication of the Proceedings of the Eichmann Trial, 1992-1995), vol. III, pp. 1189-1192 (*Eichmann Proceedings*). In his testimony at the trial, he related that he had been taken to Chelmno in late 1941. The account of the castle, the inscriptions, the trucks, the forest, and the horrific experience of burying his wife and children correspond to the account in "The Story of Koil." Another prisoner, Jakob Grojanowski, escaped with him. The escapees evidently forwarded the information to towns in the Warthegau area of western Poland several weeks after the murders in Chelmno began. Grojanowski escaped from Chelmno on January 19, 1942, evidently reached the Warsaw ghetto in February 1942, and gave his testimony to the Ringelblum archivists. On the basis of this testimony, given in Yiddish, the Ringelblum archives produced reports in Polish and German on what was happening in Chelmno. The Polish-language report was addressed to the mission of the Polish Government-in-exile in London, and information to this effect was indeed forwarded to London. The German version was meant for distribution among the German population, in the hope that this would lead to a response. Whether this was done is unknown. Grojanowski himself did not survive. His testimony and the reports are in the possession of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (copy in YVA, JM/2713). The material was translated into Hebrew by Elisheva Shaul, "Taking of Testimony from the Forced Undertaker Jakob Grojanowski, Izbice-Kolo-Chelmno," *Yalkut Moreshet* 35 (April 1983), pp. 101-122. A comparison of the accounts in the two documents — Grojanowski's testimony as documented by the Oneg Shabbat archivists in Warsaw, and

reaction — “Most of them doubt that the escapees are telling the truth” — and describes the rabbi’s continued efforts to obtain information from others. (The entry for the first day of Iyyar 5702, April 16-17, 1942, contains a report on the deportation of their families and communities. They were not seen alive again, and the question “Where were they taken?” continued to reverberate.) The information in the memoir corresponds to that in the diary, down to minute details.

An additional episode repeated in both sources, reflecting the incredulity at this stage, is the rumor that Podchlebnik had gotten married. “How can a person who has witnessed all of this wish to get married? It can only be that he is a lowly person who is interested in frightening the public.” Others believed the information but construed it as being localized. The rabbi himself remarked, “My heart tells me that everything this man has said is true, that it stands on its own legs.”

The accounts of daily life in the camp — hunger and its results, relentless sadism, collective punishment — are quite similar in the two segments. The account of mortality and burial is identical and copious in both sources. The efforts to continue observing the rules of *Halakha* are expressed similarly:

Diary (Adar 21, 5702, March 10, 1942): Memoir (original, p. 72):

<p>I prepared all the bodies for burial as the Torah requires. Out of a mattress and a sack we made a hoop, a shirt, and pants of cloth, and a hat and a belt. We dressed all of them in these.</p>	<p>We gathered to minister to the deceased, to ready him for burial....I tried to do everything in the manner required by Halakha....</p>
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Both sources also elaborate on an episode that left a residue of piercing agony: an event that the author calls “Burying a Boy Alive,” including harsh moral and halakhic vacillations and a decision not to perpetrate such a burial.¹³

Podchlebnik’s testimony as documented by Aharonson — suggests that they correspond, although a general and textual comparison would require an in-depth study.

¹³ There are minute differences:

The description of the Jewish leaders in the camp also corresponds quite closely in both documents. The correspondence includes the leaders' functions, the way their comrades perceived them, and the special ordeal experienced by one of them, Avraham Zajf, who took an exemplary moral posture when asked to select people for collective punishment.

In these matters, which lie at the crux of the diary, the comparison of the sources elicits amazing results: the correspondence usually extends to the minutiae. It is true that "only" three years separate the two texts, but the author underwent very harsh experiences during those years. Nevertheless, he carried out his reconstruction with a maximum of precision.

Matters in Which the Memoir Adds or Changes Something Relative to the Diary

As the memoir is usually more detailed in style than the diary, it expands or elaborates on matters that were mentioned in the diary by allusion only. Obviously, the memoir portrays people's emotions and personalities more extensively and sometimes even describes the scenery. Beyond these elaborations, however, the memoir adds several matters of interest in terms of parallelism with the diary.

Events concerning the Jewish camp leaders. Several issues of great importance are mentioned only in the memoir, such as the choice of camp leaders. The diary condenses these appointments, made by the Germans, into one sentence: "[The camp commandant] liked a few of them for various reasons and appointed them to be police and record-keepers" (March 8-9, 1942, in the first entry in the diary). The memoir describes this event in greater detail:

<p>Diary ('<i>Aley Mererot</i>, pp. 105-107):</p> <p>Name of the boy: Michael Danziger of Podembiec, aged 16.</p> <p>Reason for punishment: picked two unripe apples along the path that they took.</p>	<p>Memoir (original, pp. 74-75, '<i>Aley Mererot</i>, pp. 142-143):</p> <p>Name of the boy: Podembewski, aged 18. The error evidently is because of his hometown, Podembiec.</p> <p>Reason for punishment: approached a Polish home to ask for food.</p>
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Several of the Jews in the camp had been members of the “ruling” Judenräte (Jewish Councils) in their home towns. When they came to the camp, they also began to plan actions that would make them stand out in order to lay claim to relative rule. We knew that two Jews, Feibish Kamlazh and Philip Zielonka of Gabin, were “circulating” around the SS men. The first of them was young and dynamic; the camp commandant liked him from the very start and appointed him as his secretary. The other one, Philip, was such a giant that the camp commandant, tall and strapping, looked puny next to him (*‘Aley Merorot*, p. 133).

The names of the appointees are the same in both sources: Philip Zielonka of Gabin, Feibish Kamlazh, Avraham Zajf (the camp commandant’s bookkeeper), and Avraham Najdorf, Kamlazh’s father-in-law. However, the memoir describes another phase in the appointment of the camp leaders. It seems that after the Germans made these appointments, the Jews convened an assembly in order to select a committee. After discovering that the leadership had already been determined, the rabbi delivered remarks about the meaning of the function of a camp leader under these circumstances and urged those assembled to remain responsible for one another:

...About fifty Jewish functionaries assembled one evening. They invited me, too, and began to debate about electing a committee. I understood at once that their talk was in vain — the positions had already been filled from “on high”....I explained to them that anyone appointed to head the camp had to bear in mind that all of us were “our Jews,” people from Gostynin county, whose wives and children had been left behind alone at home and were waiting desperately for their husbands and fathers to return. Thus we have to stick together like brothers, because lives are at stake. After all, we already see what became of the Judenräte, which had pledged all their efforts to seeking the tyrants’ favor and now find themselves in exactly the same plight as ours (*‘Aley Merorot*, p. 133).

Similarly, actions taken at the initiative of the Jewish camp leaders, such as those leading to the dismissal of the first camp commandant, who had behaved with extreme sadism (*'Aley Merorot*, p. 156) — are reported in the memoir only.

The memoir elaborates significantly on ethical questions that were presented to the camp leaders. As stated, one instance is described in both writings: the order given to Avraham Zajf, one of these leaders, to select fifteen prisoners for collective punishment. Zajf refused vehemently.¹⁴ The memoir, however, concerns itself at great length with moral questions and describes dilemmas that the diary overlooks totally. It also illustrates Aharonson's relations with the camp leaders.

An especially agonizing issue, discussed several times in the memoir, concerned the preparation of lists of people for transports, in consultation with the rabbi, from the summer of 1942 until the camp was liquidated about a year later.¹⁵ There are also certain differences in the discussion about the absence of rebellion in the camp. The diary section treated this question as a theoretical one, "for the coming generations of researchers," in the essay "Why We Did Not Fight for Our Lives" (written no later than August 1943, in the midst of the *Aktionen*). The memoir reported the question as a practical one discussed in the last few days of the camp. Below are the rationales presented:

Diary—essay (*'Aley Merorot*, pp. 122-123):

a. Disbelief in the destination of the transports, which induced a degree of complacency.

Memoir (original, p. 98):

a. Those who would have led the rebellion were complacent, not realizing that the Nazis' plan involved total annihilation.

¹⁴ Diary: *'Aley Merorot*, pp. 119-120. Memoir: original, p. 106, *'Aley Merorot*, p. 171.

¹⁵ *'Aley Merorot*, pp. 161-165. See also Esther Farbstein, "The Four Cubits of Halakha — in the Writings of a Community Rabbi during the Holocaust," Part B, "Questions from the Valley of Deepest Darkness," *Sinai*, Vol. 118 (Spring 1996) (Hebrew), pp. 43-70. The article analyzes this issue in the writings and contrasts it with other sources.

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| <p>b. The issue of collective responsibility.</p> <p>c. Conditions in the camp had sapped the prisoners' physical and spiritual strength.</p> <p>d. The circumstances—strict guarding and the suddenness of the <i>Aktionen</i>—ruled out an uprising.</p> <p>e. The prisoners knew that rebellion would signify their demise.</p> | <p>b. The Jews were afraid to commit murder; this rationale is mentioned in the memoir only. “This may have been because murder, even of the worst enemy, is contrary to the Jewish nature.”</p> <p>c. Despair and apathy had rendered the prisoners unable to act.</p> <p>d. There were unforeseen circumstances; many initiators of resistance were absent at that time..</p> |
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Why did the memoir overlook the issue of collective responsibility when it discussed the disagreements about the rebellion at the time of action? Why was the fear of committing murder not mentioned as a theoretical consideration in the essay? The answer may have to do with the circumstances that evolved between the time the diary and the memoir were written; there may be other reasons. In any case, the rebellion scheme was not carried out, as the rabbi notes with anguish, profound disappointment, and feelings of guilt: “We missed an appropriate opportunity.”

The issue of clinging to faith. In this matter, as in the previous context, both works treat the issue, but in the memoir it is done more extensively. Both writings are imbued with a profound spirit of religious faith. The diary begins with the following expression: “With the help of God, Judge of the truth, this will be written for the posterity of the conceived [Jewish] people.” At its end, it states, “We nullify our will before the will of the Supreme One, Judge of the truth.” However, descriptions of faith are presented and devotional remarks are quoted almost only in the memoir. Examples are the contents of several sermons that the rabbi delivered on various occasions, lectures on matters of faith, and matters of prayers and benedictions. These remarks illuminate the

rabbi's emotions and confrontations with challenging moments with respect to faith. One example is the case of Reb Simha Gardom of Kutno, who during the *Aktionen* decided not to go out to work. It is of interest to compare the textual accounts:

Diary (July 8, 1942):

...Reb Simha Gardom of Kutno. This man consulted [with me] several weeks ago, [explaining] that when he went out to work he had been beaten terribly because he was advanced in years and was highly unaccustomed to working in the fields. He is weak by nature, "a teacher," and has chosen to sit in his room at religious study even in his last days [rather than] to go out to work and absorb interminable

Memoir:

Reb Simha was an intelligent Jew, a teacher by nature, one of our most important people....One day in the month of Iyyar, Reb Simha came to me and told me he had decided not to go out to work anymore...He knew he could not hold out much longer. Why should he suffer and afflict himself further?...to absorb beatings? Would it not be better to learn a page of Talmud every day? But

beatings, even though he knows full well that that this will hasten his death. [It is] as the Sages said in [Talmud, Tractate] *Ketubot* 33: “Had they beaten Hanania, Mishael, and Azaria...even they would have prostrated themselves before the idols.” To wit: there isn’t a man who can withstand afflictions that are worse than death. (*Aley Merorot*, p. 111).

they would notice him...”In that case, I prefer to go to the World of Truth with a page of Talmud than with a shovel.”

Reb Simha was about sixty years old at that time. My entreaties to dissuade him were of no use (original, pp. 93-94, *Aley Merorot*, pp. 158-160).

The writings evoke the image of a religious scholar committed to *Halakha*, whose soul has bonded with the pages of his Talmud. Both works make it clear that Reb Simha believed he was unable to withstand the afflictions that awaited him and decided to stay behind in the camp and engage in religious study. In the diary, the argument focuses on the question of afflictions (in the personal sense and in their halakhic implications), whereas the memoir adds the aspect of outlook. Reb Simha’s love of Torah is stressed, and because his fate was already sealed, he wished to choose the manner of his death: “I prefer to go to the World of Truth with a page of Talmud than with a shovel.” The rabbi’s response is also quoted:

Diary:

This man consulted [with me].

Memoir:

My entreaties to dissuade him were of no use.

The rabbi’s attitude toward the essence of life and the hastening of death corresponds to what we know of what happened in the last days at Konin. The account of the Jewish festivals elaborates not only on the conditions under which these festivals were observed but also, and foremost, on the personal experiences of faith. Such is the account of the first Passover *sefer*

in Konin, in which the description of the recitation of the *Haggadah* and the *sheheheyenu* benediction¹⁶ is especially evocative:

We also had a *Haggadah*, and we all began to recite it with holy trepidation. When I finished reciting *kiddush* and came to the *sheheheyenu* blessing, the entire assemblage broke into half an hour of bitter weeping. I spoke with those around me and asked, “If we conduct the seder in tears and bitterness, instead of celebrating the anniversary of our freedom in joy and exaltation, have we not recited the blessing for naught?” Thus I focused with precision on the phrasing of the [*Haggadah*] text:” “The days of your lives’ [refers to] the days, ‘all the days of your lives’ [refers to] the nights.” To wit: even in gloomy, benighted times, as we experience pain and abject humiliation, even then we are duty-bound to observe the commandment of retelling the miracle of the Exodus, the source of future redemption from the exile of the four kingdoms (*Aley Merorot*, pp. 145).

An interesting account that allows us to examine differences between the texts and the information contained in them is the episode of a Jewish doctor from Germany who was sent to the Konin camp in the spring of 1942, and remained there until shortly before the camp was liquidated. As very few accounts in Rabbi Aharonson’s diary and memoir are not directly connected with the hardships of camp life, his preoccupation with this episode in both sources stands out. The encounter with this individual seems to have made an impression on others as well, because the doctor is mentioned in additional testimonies from Konin. The initial account illuminates the doctor’s relations with fellow Jews from Poland and the transformations in his Jewish identity, which were prompted by the partnership of fate and the relationships it slowly created—a mosaic in microcosm of the devastation of German Jewry’s spiritual world. Thus, both sources describe the first encounter with the doctor:

¹⁶ The *seder* is the ceremony and celebration that opens the Passover holiday, marking the liberation and departure of the ancient Israelites from bondage in Egypt. The *Haggadah* is the book of texts and prayers recited and sung at the *seder*. The *kiddush* opens the *seder* with a blessing on wine, and concludes with the *sheheheyenu* benediction, praising God: “who has kept us alive and preserved us and enabled us to reach this moment.”

Diary, May 25, 1942:

A Jewish doctor named Hans Knopf, from Berlin, was brought to the *lager*, a dermatologist and urologist. In the First World War, he had been active in the German army and was given a high rank and citations for excellence. He is an "Ashkenazi" in the full sense of the word (*'Aley Merorot*, p. 108).

Memoir:

In the summer of 5702...a limousine came into the camp. Several SS officers stepped out of it, followed by a serious and grandly dressed old man with gold-rimmed spectacles on his nose. The chauffeur unloaded six leather suitcases, each bearing a label with its owner's name. After the SS officers shook his hand, they bid him a courteous farewell and left... As we observed this grandly-dressed esquire with his six expensive leather suitcases, in a Jewish forced-labor camp, we went into a fever of curiosity. We all strained our eyes to observe this gladdening phenomenon within our benighted camp. We thought he belonged to the class of our rulers, the "luminaries of the generation" who had rocketed overnight from the dunghills....A picture of himself as a high-ranking officer, decorated with a dozen citations, on horseback at the head of a company of German Jews, was suspended over his bed. Sometimes he would dandify himself by putting on his officer's uniform, embellished with military decorations given him by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany...(Original, pp. 91-92, *'Aley Merorot*, p. 157).

As we see, the memoir describes the persona of Dr. Hans Knopf at considerable length and, from the same ironic point of view, reflects the gap between Polish and Western Jews.¹⁷ Rabbi Aharonson describes the sense of superiority that the doctor projected, his demands for a “comfortable room and a clinic,” and “food like the Germans’.” Although the rabbi pokes fun at this, the doctor plainly enjoyed a different status. The Germans did not subject him to violence; he was given a room that, as a “German patriot,” he decorated with photographs and medals from his glittering military past as an officer in World War I. “Sometimes he would dandify himself by putting on his officer’s uniform, embellished with military decorations given him by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany.” The author’s ridicule is coupled with a sense of pity for “this poor *yekke*, who doesn’t know where he’s been placed.” Knopf related to the Jews with condescension and estrangement, as if ashamed to come into contact with “dangerous Jewish criminals.” At first, he even treated his Jewish patients roughly. Slowly, however, he began to trace the connection between their fate and his own:

This Berlin Jew, who had long since severed all the strands that had tied him with the Jewish people and faith, slowly began to sense, here in the camp, that he was nevertheless an offspring of our patriarch Jacob... In a word, in the camp he became a Jew (Memoir, original, p. 107, *Aley Merorot*, pp. 172-173).

When he discovered that Aharonson was a rabbi, Knopf attempted to approach him:

He never stopped pestering me: What will come of all this? He would often pour out his heart to me. He told me how devoted he had been, how he had served and fought for the German homeland....As I observed him, this despairing and disillusioned Jew, I became heartsick. The Judenrat helped him as best it could (*ibid.*).

¹⁷ See also Avraham Barkai, “Between East and West: Jews from Germany in the Lodz Ghetto,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 16 (1984), pp. 272-332. The article describes the historical background and the encounter from the points of view of both local and Western Jews.

The second event involving Dr. Knopf that both sources mention took place shortly before Passover 5703 (1943). The diary devotes one sentence to it. The memoir provides a detailed account of preparations for the *seder* and the physician's surprising personal involvement: his initiative, the risk he took by baking *matza* in his room, Jewish experiences from his past, and even a sense of pride.

Diary:

“And they came to my room, including Dr. Hans of Berlin, and we held a kosher seder in the dead of night, by the light of the moon, surreptitiously...” (*Aley Merorot*, p. 122).

Memoir (in a detailed account of the seder preparations and the physician's involvement in them):

The German doctor, of all people, insisted that we should hold the seder despite our great fatigue and the late hour. He also encouraged us and told us proudly that he had once held a traditional seder... (Original, p. 107, *Aley Merorot*, p. 173).

Both sources communicate the change that occurred in the identity of this Jew.¹⁸

The last encounter with the doctor is described only in the memoir, shortly before the Konin camp was liquidated. In the summer of 1943, in the midst of the final *Aktionen*, the camp leaders held a “rare tragic consultation” with the rabbi, in the course of which a suicide plan was brought up (see below). When the physician “discovered” the group in the room of the Jewish police, they

¹⁸ The difficulty in parting from the German identity surfaces in another part of the diary: the account of a dialogue between a Jew named Yehoshua Soianz from Cologne and the commandant on the first day of the Succoth holiday in autumn 1942, when three ill Jews, including Soianz, were taken away. The commandant shouted at him, “Hold your tongue, you're going to your homeland.” And the Jew answered: “My homeland is in Cologne, Germany.” The commandant replied: “The lovely streets of Cologne have already been cleansed of Jews.”

confided in him — and he identified with them. “I concur with you,” he said, and parted with them warmly, hot tears pouring from his eyes.¹⁹

The camp leaders in Konin indeed carried out their suicide plan several weeks later. Dr. Knopf was observed running about; then he disappeared. The surviving Jews found him in his room:

On the doctor’s desk, covered with a white tablecloth, stood innumerable family photographs, neatly arrayed... There were also photographs of his military past, including some at various fronts of the war in 1914-1918. They were living testimony to his grand and patriotic military past... Letters were also arrayed, as were medals in their original packing, in chronological order. And there on his bed, between the white sheets, lay our comrade the physician in delicate silk pajamas, the most important citations and medals pinned to his right breast (*Aley Merorot*, p. 181).

Thus, in his final moments, Dr. Hans Knopf expressed a profound connection with his former identity. The Nazis opened his suitcases and apportioned the “estate” among themselves before his very eyes, which were still open.

The two texts are strikingly different. The diary entry is typically condensed and to-the-point, but it communicates the crux of the matters and, to some extent, their spirit. The style of the memoir not only expands quantitatively but

¹⁹ There is an interesting parallelism between this account and an event that took place in the Budzyn camp. One of the inmates in Budzyn was Bauchwitz, a Jew from Stettin, Germany, whose family had converted to Christianity when he was six years old. The commandant sentenced him to hang for not having informed on a prisoner who had escaped in order to prevent the killing of another ten people. Bauchwitz asked the commander to fulfill his last request: “I was a German officer in the First World War and I fought at Verdun. Of my entire battalion, only a few survived. And I was awarded the Iron Cross First Class. For this reason...I ask that I should be shot and not hanged.” To this, the *Wachtmeister* replied, “Whether you have the Iron Cross First Class or not, whether you were an officer or not, in my eyes you are a stinking Jew, and you will be hanged.” With that, Bauchwitz climbed to the gallows and asked whether he had the right to say a few words to the assembly of Jews; this the commander allowed him. The condemned man said, “I was born a Jew, and all that I remember of my Judaism is one prayer — in fact, only the opening words of that prayer, and they are: ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, and that is all I remember. But I want to and I am going to die as a Jew - and I ask you Jews to say *Kaddish* for me.’ And we did.” Thus Bauchwitz resumed his identity on the verge of his death. From the testimony of Prof. David Wdowinski, *Eichmann Proceedings*, vol. III, p. 1234.

Dan Michman cited this testimony as an example of those who returned to their identity on the verge of their death, in the sense of *Psalms* 90:3 — “You return man to dust; You decreed, ‘Return, you mortals!’” Dan Michman, “Rightly Have You Humbled Me,” *Mileit* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1983) (Hebrew), pp. 341-350.

expresses the author's personal and experiential point of view in a flowery, ironic style.

Matters Mentioned Only in the Memoir (or By Allusion in the Diary)

Amazingly, several matters of great importance are reported only in the memoir: the communication of information on the murders in Chelmno to the Jewish public before the expulsion from Sanniki, attempts at resistance in Konin, the suicide episode of the Jewish camp leaders in Konin, and halakhic dilemmas and rulings.

Communication of information on the murders in Chelmno: As stated, the sources present corresponding accounts of the arrival of this information in Sanniki. The memoirs, however, describe several additional transmissions of information on the extermination to higher authorities as far back as December 1941, and, mainly, in early 1942 — very shortly after the murders in Chelmno began. The diary says nothing about these. Attempts to pass on this information were made along several paths:

1. To the chairman of the Judenrat in nearby Gabin and Gostynin. The information on extermination by gassing was initially taken to be rumor.
2. In coordination with the community leaders, the information was forwarded by a mission of public figures headed by Avraham Zajf to the central Judenrat of Upper Silesia, headed by Moshe Merin, in the belief that he had some influence on the Germans. Merin refused to relate to the matter, argued that he knew of Auschwitz only as “a place where opponents of the regime are destroyed,” and advised them to concentrate on establishing workshops and mobilizing the community for labor on the Germans' behalf.²⁰ This response corresponds to what we know about the “salvation-through-work” policy of Merin and others. The rabbi adds his personal opinion, explaining that the response of Merin and the community leaders in Gabin may have originated in a sense of helplessness and a feeling that it was best not to cause panic. The rabbi also wrote about this mission in *Pinkas Gostynin*, where he describes the hardships the mission experienced until it reached Zaglebia and met with Merin. Merin denied all knowledge of

²⁰ Memoir, manuscript, pp. 54-55.

extermination but called a meeting at which they might present their argument. His reaction and attitude left the mission in a state of shock.²¹

3. The information was presented to rabbis in Bedzin, at a meeting arranged with them by the members of the mission after Merin's response.²²

4. The information was forwarded to Rabbi Aharonson's own rabbi, the Sochaczower *Rebbe*,²³ in Warsaw in March 1942. Rabbi Aharonson subsequently disclosed the contents of this letter in *Pinkas Sochaczew*: "Out of fear that the letter would be opened, I wrote by way of allusion, 'Aunt Esther of 7 Megilla Street is coming.'" The hint was clear, as Esther 7:4 states, "For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated..." Aharonson included his *rebbe's* response in one of the most dramatic sections of the memoir — that describing the last few days in the Konin camp and the soul-searching moments in which the inmates debated whether to take their own lives. He evidently kept the message with him as a motto of his faith in life:

...I said to them all: "To life!"

Which "to life"?...Aren't we drinking "to death"?

²¹ Yehoshua Moshe Aharonson, "Chelmno," in I. M. Biderman, ed., *Pinkas Gostynin* (New York and Tel Aviv: Gostynin Memorial Book Committees, 1960), (Yiddish), pp. 311-314. The account corresponds to what additional sources tell us about some Judenrat leaders' attitude toward labor for the Germans. For example: "The heads of the Judenrat placed their trust in labor; they believed that considerations of logic and utility would eventually defeat 'Judeophobia' and lust for murder." Yisrael Gutman, "The Concept of Labor in Judenrat Policy," in Yisrael Gutman and Cynthia J. Haft, eds., *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe 1933-1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979), pp. 151-180. Moshe Merin, chairman of the central Judenrat of Upper Silesia, was one of those who adhered to this perception of the events and devised his policies accordingly, as did Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski in the Lodz ghetto, Jakob Gens in Vilna, and Ephraim Barasz in Bialystok. Apprehension about "causing a panic" is reminiscent of the response of other leaders, such as Rabbi Leo Baeck in Theresienstadt.

²² Shner, *Documentation Enterprise*, p. 23.

²³ Rabbi David Borenstein, great-grandson of the Kotzker *Rebbe*, was born in 1876 and ordained as a *rebbe* in 1926. He established his Hasidic court in Lodz, where he also founded a *yeshiva*. When the city was occupied, he was transferred to Warsaw, where officially he worked in Schultz's factory. Unable to endure the conditions of starvation, he died in the ghetto after Succoth in 1941. See *Pinkas Sochaczew* (Sochaczow) (Jerusalem: Organization of Sochaczew Emigrés in Israel, 1962), pp. 636-638. Rabbi Aharonson had been a member of the Sochaczew Hasidic sect since his youth, and his relationship with his *rebbe* grew more intense during his stay in Warsaw (when the war broke out). When refugees from the surrounding towns came to Sanniki on Purim and described how their towns had been liquidated, the rabbi decided to attempt to communicate this information to his *rebbe*.

“Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me...”[*Psalms* 23] I am referring to eternal life (*Aley Merorot*, pp. 175-177).

Attempts at resistance in Konin. The diary makes no reference to actual resistance endeavors. On the contrary, the essay dealing directly with the subject of an uprising states obliquely that the issue of resistance was discussed, but “the few who understood did not wish to take responsibility for the whole group.” The memoir, in contrast, describes a protracted, almost continual discussion of resistance plans from the summer of 1942, when the *Aktionen* in Konin began. The first practical attempt is described in an account of the third *Aktion*, when candidates for the transports resisted:

...The Torah says: “For your own sake, therefore, be most careful.” We must resist. For three hours they managed to dig a tunnel deep in the bowels of the earth. Had the murderers held back for one more hour, they would all have managed to break out (original, p. 95, *Aley Merorot*, p. 161).

Following this *Aktion*, the prisoners prepared thirty “sharp and long” knives and decided to instigate an uprising upon the next *Aktion*. “After all, sooner or later, they will seize and remove all of us. Let us at least defend Jewish honor and avenge our shed blood.”

The primary motives in resistance were self-preservation — rescue — and “honor” coupled with revenge. In the summer of 1943, amidst reports about Auschwitz and the impending liquidation of the camp, meetings devoted to the subject of resistance became more frequent and plans for an uprising coalesced. As various resistance proposals were brought up, “only one thought preoccupied us: don’t let them take us away like sheep to the slaughter!”²⁴

Did the Warsaw ghetto uprising influence the trends of thought on how to respond in Konin? Both sources leave no doubt that the Konin prisoners had

²⁴ The expression, borrowed from Jewish sources, is quoted in this context and thus is free of the connotations that became attached to it when it became common coin.

been apprised of the uprising in Warsaw. The essay attached to the diary mentions Warsaw parenthetically as an instance of valor. The memoir mentions a letter from the underground containing information on the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Further sources indicate that the Konin inmates had heard about the uprising from Poles who worked in the camp and that these rumors bolstered their morale.²⁵ Presumably, although this was not stated in writing, the reports on the Warsaw ghetto were mentioned not only for the reader's information but to denote an event that left its impression and impact on the Konin inmates. Either way, the rebellion plans were not carried out because of the aforementioned difficulties, foremost "helplessness and indecision."

Suicide of the Jewish camp leaders in Konin. One of the most remarkable responses in the Polish camps occurred in Konin: a suicide-arson operation by the camp leaders.²⁶ The diary itself says nothing about this exceptional event, but documents attached to the diary by two of the camp leaders, Zajf and Kamlazh, report on it.

The diary subjected the issue of suicide to a theoretical and principled discussion long before the suicide was carried out. This discussion is exceptional both in depicting the matter almost as the topic of a research paper ("Why should we live when we have lost our families and know what awaits us?") and in the collection of responses to the question that had been posed. The halakhic answer that the Torah forbids suicide was given, but moral and psychological rationales were also discussed: reluctance to facilitate the enemy's murders and, above all, the desire to live, a matter that transcends the understanding of any one individual and originates in the Creator's wish to sustain the world. (Notably, the diary mentions several suicides of prisoners in the camp.)

Two documents in the diary section — letters by two of the suicides, Kamlazh and Zajf, which were interred along with the diary — mention the event itself in terse, pregnant language. Zajf concluded his letter with the following words:

²⁵ Mottl, "The Uprising in the Konin Camp". The memoir was written at a time when refugees in the DP camps had begun to discuss rebellion and "Jewish honor," but, as was stated, the diary mentioned Warsaw, and the essay "Why We Did Not Fight for our Lives," which is part of the diary section, contains references to "rebellion" and "honor".

²⁶ See also *Yedioth Ahronoth*, April 27, 1995 (Holocaust Memorial Day).

“We have decided to sell our lives for a dear price — the perpetration of an uprising. May the earth not cover up their blood!” Kamlazh wrote more explicitly: “I and other comrades are preparing to act as Samson did, if only we are given an opportunity to do so.” In the memoir, however, a sizable segment is devoted to the camp leaders’ suicide. The event is described in detail: its background, the consultations immediately preceding it, its rationales, and the tragic outcome. The decision to respond in the form of an uprising was taken during an emotional consultation in August 1943. Nine of the camp leaders gathered in the police room in the middle of an overcast night:

Refined, intelligent people, young and strong people, eager people, talented people who believed in the new Western civilization, in social integrity, and in progress, assembled there to decide in what fashion to rid themselves of their lives of humiliation, the intolerable lives of a barbarian monster in a turgid world (Memoir, original, pp. 111-112; *Aley Merorot*, p. 176).

This gathering was prompted by information that the final *Aktion* and liquidation of the camp were nigh. A craving for revenge erupted, and the debate focused on the critical question: Should their death occur in the course of revenge or in the collective suicide of all the camp leaders? At first, revenge plans were discussed. Everyone in attendance, including Rabbi Aharonson, agreed that German blood should be shed before they died. The function was to be given to the massive Philip Zielonka, and the rabbi encouraged Zielonka to derive inspiration from the example of Samson. “Show the valor of the heroic Samson. Avenge our haters. Call mightily to God: ‘Give me strength and courage on this occasion!’” However, even this strapping Jew succumbed when ordered to shatter skulls with a knife. His disheartened response, punctuated with sighs, made it clear to them that they could not rely on him. Thus, out of despair, the inmates took up a proposal for the collective suicide of the camp leadership.

Kamlazh, one of the leaders involved, gave the matter a moral rationale: the fear that they, the strongest inmates in the camp, would be forced to murder

their weaker compatriots. “We should take our own lives since we do not wish to be the murderers of our brethren.” Rabbi Aharonson opposed the suicide plan vigorously and unequivocally. His reasoning was halakhic: the Torah forbids suicide. When the others cited King Saul’s behavior, Aharonson groped for a reply (“I had no answer to offer,” he wrote), but he stood his ground even when they gathered to drink “*L’Haim*” (“to life”) at their last meeting. As was described above, Dr. Hans Knopf concurred with the suicide decision. The Jewish leaders, disregarding the rabbi’s view in this matter of principle, took their lives on August 13, 1943,²⁷ several days after this meeting. The rabbi describes the torching of the camp, the sabotage of the water pipes, and the encounter with the corpses of his comrades who had hanged themselves. Two other Jews joined this action, but the rabbi managed to undo the noose of one of them at the last moment. According to the testimony of one of the survivors, Shmuel Mottl, Aharonson also forcibly prevented the suicides of another two inmates, who attempted to hurl themselves into a well (so another witness wrote to Avraham Zajf’s brother in Bergen Belsen).²⁸ According to an investigation conducted at the Ghetto Fighters’ House, fifteen people belonged to the original group of conspirators, and eight of them, including the doctor, attempted suicide. At least one survived. This episode has yet to find its proper place in the historical discourse about Jewish leaders in the camps.

Notably, despite his principled objection to their behavior, the rabbi considered these leaders “martyrs”:

“The day after the event, we gathered the bones and ashes of the cremated martyrs and buried them there. We placed Kamlazh’s head and Getsl Kleinot’s hand, which were not totally incinerated, in a large jar—akin to the *tefillin* [phylacteries] of the hand and *tefillin* of the head—along with a piece of paper bearing the names of the perished victims (*Aley Merorot*, p. 186).”

²⁷ Zajf’s letter, written on August 12, states: “Tomorrow [the people] will be taken out for execution.” Indeed, Friday fell on August 13. Mottl (*Konin Book*, p. 623) mistakenly cites the date as August 9. Richmond, too, examined the date in other sources and concluded that the suicide occurred on August 13, 1943. See Richmond, *Konin*, especially p. 324, fn. 7.

²⁸ Gershon and Shmuel Mottl, letter from the DP camp in Germany to the brother of Avraham Zajf, GFHA, 175/E8, and testimony of Shmuel Mottl, YVA, 03/3661 (Shmuel Mottl). See also Mottl’s memoir in *Konin Book*, pp. 622-624.

The unusual simile (*tefillin*, which are bound upon the hand and the head of male Jews in prayer), the manner of the burial, and the referral to those who perished as “martyrs” indicate that, after the fact, despite his objections, Rabbi Aharonson treated the matter with understanding and the casualties with respect. He may have considered them the victims of extreme duress, in the spirit of remarks in the Talmud (Tractate *Yevamot* 78b) about King Saul, who, although a suicide, was deemed worthy of eulogy and those who disparaged him worthy of punishment. The *Shulhan ‘Arukh* points in the same direction: “Nothing is withheld from one who takes his own life under extreme duress, like King Saul” (*Yoreh De’ah* 345:3).²⁹ In other words, such a casualty is eulogized and honored with the customs of bereavement.

The difference between the two texts stands out in another matter. While halakhic rulings, festivals and observances, and halakhic dilemmas are hardly mentioned in the diary, the general issue of preserving religious identity and the burden of the author’s function as a rabbi are a major motif in the memoir. In the halakhic rulings, questions and events in daily camp life are discussed. These referred to such issues as eating and reciting blessings over non-kosher food (original, p. 68), making shoe linings out of Torah-scroll parchments (original, p. 97), and questions of life and death — Jews switching places with each other in order to obtain paid labor, and, in the main, preparing lists of Jews for *Aktionen*.³⁰

What Differentiates the Diary from the Memoir?

When we compare the diary with the memoir in terms of the subjects and events covered by both, we find an amazing overlap between the two. In major issues, such as the conditions of life, mortality, and burial, the description of Avraham Zajf’s attitude, the episode of the dying boy whom they were ordered to bury, the letters from Sanniki, and the chronology — to name only a few — the correspondence between the two accounts is much closer than one might expect of a memoir written after a lapse of three tumultuous, difficult years. This lends credibility to the totality of the rabbi’s recollections,

²⁹ The *Shulhan ‘Arukh* is the code of Jewish law, codified in Israel in the 16th century by Rabbi Joseph Caro. *Yoreh De’ah* is one of its four parts.

³⁰ See Farbstein, “Four Cubits,” Part B, pp. 43-70.

including those that do not have parallel accounts or that pertain to a different period of time. Thus, our knowledge is enriched through cross-fertilization, and, in the broader view of the events, we may relate to the memoir as complementary to the diary.

However, there are also quite a few differences and additions in the memoir, and it is worth our while to consider why they occurred. The argument noted at the beginning of this article — that memoir writings are affected by ever-changing trends of thought and tend to pontificate — is irrelevant in the case at hand. Both sources are “pre-testimony,” so to speak, i.e., created in proximity to the events. The reliability of the memoir can be examined by means of additional tools — its parallelism with the diary and the letters attached to it on matters mentioned in both documents (the personalities and suicide of the camp leaders) — and verified by means of additional testimonies, such as those of other survivors from Konin.³¹

Some of the differences reflect the circumstances under which the documents were written. Because this diary, like Holocaust diaries in general, was produced under exceedingly harsh circumstances, an intention to be *brief* and to *condense* is evident. Various physical difficulties also came into play in writing the diary: obtaining paper, finding a place to write, concealing the document, and the constant fear of discovery. These factors led to brevity and condensation in writing, as the author attests:

May the reader forgive me for the occasional grammatical imprecision and statistical irregularity. I am writing in the middle of the night, surreptitiously, and am in mortal danger if anyone notices. Therefore, in some places I have concealed twice as much as I have disclosed. Perceptive readers will understand [what kind of document] they are holding and will breathe living

³¹ See, for example, the statements by Shmuel Mottl. The author also created the personal impression of being the epitome of precision and order, as well as a man who demanded that others be precise and avoid overstatement. This attitude was shared by Zvi Shner, who interviewed the rabbi, and Yehoshua Eibschitz, his partner in chairing the editorial board of *Zakhor*. I spoke with several people who had known him, and they noted that whenever Holocaust events were mentioned in an overstated, bombastic fashion, he responded with outrage and demanded that matters be treated exactly as they had occurred. His notepad of writings when he functioned as rabbi after the war gives further evidence of how strict and precise he was.

spirit into the letters I have written, thus giving genuine form to this encrypted text (*Aley Merorot*, p. 122).

The diary compresses a year and a half into several pages. This factor, which we may call an objective one, may explain why most of the diary is written in the style of a topical report. Its language is usually informative, and several details that are missing or communicated by allusion only are presented in greater detail in the memoir. This may also explain why the memoir describes the author's feelings at greater length and even depicts the scenery.

One of the most significant circumstances surrounding the writing of Holocaust diaries was the *fear that the manuscript would be discovered*, thus endangering the author's fellow inmates. The very act of writing endangered the author, for recording and commemorating the events were explicitly contrary to the Nazis' intent to maintain secrecy, obfuscate the traces of the extermination operation, and brutally obliterate the prisoners' humanity and the remnants of their personal identity. Therefore, when writing about matters that might endanger the general inmate community, such as plans for an uprising, the author evidently used the utmost caution. This explains the nearly total absence of reference in the diary to any manifestation of an uprising or resistance to the Germans. From the first few months, the author refrained from mentioning personal manifestations of rebellion or the initiatives of camp leaders, such as the action taken to have the camp commander dismissed. This becomes more evident from the summer of 1942 on, as the diary says nothing about thoughts of rebellion and revenge, the discussions, and the matter of the *nisyonot* — even as the resistance plans were being formed. This factor also explains the lack of reference to information that arrived from outside the camp, which might be construed as an act of rebellion. (This probably explains why the outside participant in writing the diary is mentioned only in the memoir.)

The loss of some of the diary pages should also be mentioned. The pages from October 1942 through the end of that year (pp. 17-19 of the manuscript) and the last pages of the diary have not been discovered, and their contents are unknown. It is also worth bearing in mind that the diary enterprise ended

in May 1943, several months before the camp was liquidated, whereas the *Aktionen* continued until August, at which time the suicide also occurred. Perhaps the writing was terminated because a hiding place had been found; another possible reason was the sensation of impending doom. In other words, entries in the diary were not made at the most critical time of the *Aktionen*, at which time the resistance and suicide plans were being worked through. This is yet another factor that may explain why some of the material appears only in the memoir.

The differences over the question of how to stage the uprising may also be construed in this way. The factor of fear, for example, became clear only at the moment of action, whereas the question of collective responsibility was dwarfed at the time the camp was liquidated. This answer, however, cannot explain the absence of diary entries on this subject in the summer of 1942. At that time, although the writing enterprise was in full swing, there is no hint at resistance, either by individuals or in the form of a collective plan of response. In contrast, despite the terseness and brevity that typify most of the diary, the author elaborates on the suffering in the camp, the starvation and its terrible human effects, and the manifestations of sadism. He provides lengthy descriptions of the barracks, the kinds of work, and the preparation of food, among other things. Particularly grievous occurrences—especially the abuse of young boys — are depicted in minute detail (except for the months in 1943, when extremely terse entries were made every few weeks or months).

Therefore, beyond the factors and circumstances associated with the conditions of writing, the differences between the documents should also be sought in subjective factors — the author's personal experience, emotions, motives, and fears, and the recesses of his memory.

The first matter to examine is *the author's motives* with respect to each source. This question is of the utmost significance and has been discussed in several articles about Holocaust diaries.³² All historical writing is addressed to

³² See Yisrael Gutman, "Adam Czerniakow—the Man and his Diary," in Yisrael Gutman and Livia Rothkirchen, eds., *The Catastrophe of European Jewry; Antecedents - History - Reflections* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1976), pp. 451-489, and especially pp. 451-452; and Meir Dworzecki, "Vilna Ghetto Diaries," Mordechai Eliav, ed., *Studies in Holocaust Research* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1979) (Hebrew), pp. 79-112, and especially pp. 79-80; Chaim A. Kaplan, *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan* (New York: Collier, 1973),

a certain target readership and has its own meta-history. Our diary, too, was written for posterity, as were the documents attached to it. The author explicitly addresses himself to his future readership. However, we have to read between the lines to determine whether the author's motives after the war, when he wrote the memoir, remained those that had prompted him to write the diary, or whether the change in his personal circumstances and those of history caused his motives to change. In other words, we must ask what, in the main, the author wished to commemorate in each of the sources.

"With the help of God, Judge of the truth, this will be written for the posterity of the conceived [Jewish] people." This statement, positioned at the beginning of the diary, gives vivid expression to the main reason for which this author, like other documenters of the Holocaust, took the immense risk of writing the diary — in order to leave for posterity something to remember. In the memoir, Rabbi Aharonson explains his urge to write the diary as "the duty of the hour." A special rationale was presented for the essay "Why We Did Not Fight for Our Lives." It seems that the entire diary section was also meant from the outset for researchers:

I am writing a diary, "The Scroll of the House of Bondage in Konin," a chronicle, as scholarly material for the researchers of our generation. It is written with great brevity, one portion in a thousand, with neither overstatement nor understatement, merely the matters as they actually occurred, as I witnessed them (*Aley Merorot*, p. 122).

In his memoir, the author mentions an external impetus that augments the internal one:

Immediately after Passover, the Judenrat people told me secretly that they had met a man who had introduced himself as a Communist agent. Their question was whether it was worth providing him with information on what was happening in the camp, because our families were still alive then. I considered the possible consequences of this act if it were discovered and advised them

especially p. 13; Joseph Kermish, "Diary Entries of Hersh Wasser," *Yad Vashem Studies* 15 (1983), pp. 201-209; Amos Goldberg, "The Holocaust Diaries—the Story of the Helpless," *Bi-shvil ha-Zikkaron* 13 (Spring 1996) (Hebrew), pp. 4-12.

to do no such thing. At the same time, however, it occurred to me that it was the duty of the hour to keep a diary (original, p. 88, *'Aley Merorot*, pp. 154).

About a year later, during the *Aktionen* in the Konin camp, demoralization affected the writing; yet it was overcome by the author's sense of mission. "...We began to prepare for our decline. As I wrote in my diary during those days, I would ask myself: 'For whom [am I doing this]?' but I would console myself and say, Yours is not to finish the labor!" (*'Aley Merorot*, p. 174).

These motives are reiterated explicitly in both the diary and the memoir. But did the author have further motives?

It seems that he did. In writing the diary, there is a transparent intent to *commemorate the Nazi brutality*, so that posterity would know what abuse had been visited upon the Jewish people. This explains the verbosity of the accounts of the hardships of camp life and the Germans' cruelties. This motive is typical of times of anguish, when the principal feeling is the need to retell the unbelievable: how human beings could become human beasts.

All the homiletic accounts of the hardships of the Israelites' toil in Egypt no longer suffice to portray the magnitude of the burden of our grueling labor. All the commentaries, textual and homiletic alike, have come true among us in this place (Diary, *'Aley Merorot*, p. 103).

In contrast, upon liberation, it seemed to become necessary (unconsciously, or in the aftermath of immediate consultations among the survivors) to describe the Jewish response, to recall and commemorate Jews not only as objects of suffering but as agents of action and response, as fighters for their identity and humanity. This imperative was first manifested in the diary section, in the essay "Why We Did Not Fight for Our Lives," completed in the summer of 1943. In the preface to this work, the rabbi expresses his concern about how the Holocaust generation will appear in the eyes of posterity. This awareness, which emerged only at the end of the Konin period, evidently grew in intensity after the liberation and became a central motive in the writing of the memoir.

Lest we mislead the reader, the issue here is not an intent to “harmonize and prettify,”³³ but rather a historic duty to remember this facet, along with all the rest, and not to allow testimony about the horrors to obfuscate and mask the aspect of the Jewish response. This explanation may shed light on the contexts and events discussed only in the memoir that exemplify the Jewish stance in the seething crucible that was Konin.

The influence of the various motives for writing, I believe, is evident both in the manner of description and the selection of the subjects, as well as in either the reference or non-reference to matters and events, as we have seen. In my estimation, the diary enterprise was prompted by an inner need and a sense of mission to describe the Germans’ bestiality, *humankind at its lowliest*, whereas the memoir was meant not only to describe the horrors but to commemorate the Jewish struggle—the preservation of humanity and Jewish identity under those impossible conditions, i.e., *humankind at its greatest*. This approach may also tell us why the diary omits certain matters, as noted.

However, these matters may also be an expression of the intent of the writing not only as a “duty of the hour,” but as stemming from *the author’s major experience at the time of the diary enterprise*, and this endowed the writing with its particular contours. Under the conditions of the Konin camp at the time the diary was written, even from the point of view of a rabbi who served as a source of spiritual support for others, there was no doubt that the predominant experience was the encounter with a world of pain and villainy never before known. The physical and psychological distress of Konin erupts and floods the diary. Along with additional experiences, such as the case of Avraham Zajf, these create a construct of suffering.

Furthermore, the halakhic experience, or the social response, seemed at that point to be but another link in a chain of familiar experiences: the attempt to give water to a patient despite the danger of doing so, the initiative to ask a rabbi about what benediction or prayer to recite. Stuck in the perspective of the time, the inmates did not yet know how to judge the greatness of these actions. The rabbi’s dispensation to refrain from observing the entirety of the commandments under camp conditions, as vastly difficult as this was, should

³³ Piekarz, “Literature.”

be viewed similarly. It was this newly encountered experience that, having inundated the psyche and the pen, became a central theme in the diary.

A different experience took shape as the memoir was being written. After the liberation, the survivors were relieved of the terrible war for existence and were able to contemplate matters from a fuller and retrospective point of view. This brought previously repressed experiences to the surface for reconstruction. Scenes from the Jewish milieu and the rich, passionate Jewish response became the memoirist's central experience. Some examples are the circumstances that created acute dilemmas, such as the lists for transports that had to be prepared; the cases in which unprecedented situations led to halakhic questions; the struggles to observe Jewish values, religious precepts, and festivals in the camp; and the manifestations of mutual assistance out of devotion and acceptance of risk. Again, only the memoir mentions these matters.

From this point of view, notwithstanding their reliability as a primary source, several Holocaust diaries display a weakness that deserves consideration. The very fact of their authors' immersion in the daily horrors, as expressed in their writing, diminished their preoccupation with describing events and experiences that are no less significant in Holocaust research. Their absence in these writings does not prove that they did not occur; instead, the intensity of the experiences of physical suffering and the encounter with evil were dominant at the time, shunting other recollections and experiences to an inner stratum of memory. Sometimes these matters were committed to writing later on, under different circumstances and at different times, and are no less reliable for that. The result was an additional narrative that joins the others³⁴ and, possibly, a historical narrative from a broader and deeper perspective.

Moreover, the diary was written as the work of an "emissary of the public," a rabbi whose writing communicated not only his own suffering but that of his people. The language alludes to this; so do the contents of the events described. In his diary, the rabbi speaks for the collective and therefore spares no words to describe their suffering and agony. Even the episodes cited are

³⁴ See G. A. Passmore, "The Objectivity of History," in Avraham Weinryb, ed., *Historical Thinking B* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1987) (Hebrew), pp. 328-329.

associated with the collective and its plight. Thus, one may understand why the diary diminishes the author's personal aspect. With the exception of a few entries (such as those concerning the members of his family, the live burial of the boy, and Yom Kippur worship in 1943), the rabbi says nothing about his own feelings and vacillations, remarks that he made, and cases in which he intervened personally.

One example is the question of eating non-kosher food. The diary overlooks this issue, evidently because the rabbi believed that such a question did not apply to the collective under these circumstances. The memoir, in contrast, describes the question as having been a personal experience of the author's from his first days in Konin — the dilemma of a rabbi who must make a ruling and set an example for others:

Some believed that [eating non-kosher food] is permissible only when people weaken and feel enfeebled, but I believed that because mortal risk was at stake, everyone must eat at once and not wait until the verge of death.

Since many of the Jews were undecided about eating the non-kosher soup, and aware that risk to life was at stake, I took a soup spoon, recited the blessing *she-ha-kol nihiye bid'varo*, and ate the spoonful of soup. Then I explained what *she-ha-kol nihiye bid'varo* means: Every occurrence involving human beings is the outcome of the Creator's will. It is our duty to live and to sustain ourselves. My remarks indeed had an effect, and almost everyone ate the soup ('*Aley Merorot*, p. 135).

Rabbi Aharonson's first halakhic ruling in Konin reflects his approach toward Jewish practice and the responsibility he assumed,³⁵ as manifested in many events described only in the memoir. In the list of *nisyonot*, incorporated into the memoir section, the rabbi addresses himself to that first moment of decision in these matters and explains his decision on the basis of the Jewish sources. He also made a ruling on the blessing to be recited after eating —

³⁵ Concerning the halakhic discourse, see Esther Farbstein, "Four Cubits," Part A, pp. 55-80; '*Aley Merorot*, pp. 242-244.

the one reserved for undifferentiated foods — and explicated the halakhic basis of this decision (*Aley Merorot*, pp. 242-243). Rabbi Aharonson complemented his explanation in subsequent writings by describing what he felt at the moment he decided to permit the consumption of forbidden foods.

In his first sermon after being appointed rabbi of the displaced persons camp in Austria (the outlines of which are recorded in a notepad in the possession of the family), he confessed that the decision to eat this food was so difficult for him personally that he felt he had “forfeited my whole share in the world.” Although he had made the correct ruling from the strict standpoint of religious law, Jewish mysticism ascribes to forbidden foods the power to create a callousness of the heart and the soul. Rabbi Aharonson attests to having resolved at that time no longer to officiate as a rabbi. Only when it became clear that the few rabbis who had survived were in these same circumstances — “of an assembly of two hundred rabbis in Warsaw, I was the only one left” — did he accept the office.

The diminution of the human aspect in the diary may also explain the omission of remarks that he made when the camp leadership was appointed, the condensed account of the terrible days in 1943, and other matters. In writing the diary, he seems to have subsumed and dwarfed his own experiences. He transmits the message of the collective; his personal experiences recede to a different stratum of memory. In writing the memoir, however, the author was at greater liberty to describe his personal experiences as an individual and his specific point of view as a rabbi. Therefore, the memoir articulates the daunting decisions that were forced upon him and illuminates moments of personal joy and agony, admiration, irony, and excitement, along with comments on faith and philosophy. The collective agony is manifested through the rabbi’s personal world.

The textual comparison also calls attention to several typical stylistic phenomena that occur chiefly in memoirs. These include greater recourse to expressions from the Jewish sources and, in the main, ironic language. Ironic accounts occur on every page (e.g., in the description of the German doctor) and evidently reflect both the author’s personal point of view and his psychological condition at the time he wrote the memoir. The ironic

perspective allows him to contemplate matters from the outside, as it were, and to transfer his bitterness to this alternative plane. Presumably, it also helped the entire group endure.

Conclusion

This article is one of reflections and conclusions following a comparison between a diary and a memoir written by the same author. How valid are these remarks with respect to other diaries and memoirs? They presumably reflect the same matters to some extent, but only detailed study can elucidate this.

The conclusions presented in this article, however, may inspire others to examine the matter from a broader perspective. The questions to ask in such an inquiry include the following: Do Holocaust-era writings exhibit special characteristics that correspond to the circumstances (ghetto, camp) and times of their writing? Can one undertake, in a broad context, to compare the characteristics of the themes and approaches of the diaries with those of the memoir literature in its various stages?

It seems to me that only the multiplicity of facets and strata manifested in the diaries *and* the memoirs may bring us closer to the universal history of the time. This is because a witness's account, like any historical narrative, "sheds light on a certain part...[and] discusses certain aspects....None of these reports is complete or perfect, but all contribute to the advancement of knowledge."³⁶ We should give the memoir literature the place it deserves—a loftier place than that given it thus far—and rid ourselves of excessive suspicion, especially when additional tools may confirm a reasonable degree of reliability. Thus we may also focus on those human landscapes that were less expressed in the diaries and the early memoirs.

Translated by Naftali Greenwood

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies* Vol. XXVI, Jerusalem 1998, pp. 87-128.

³⁶ A. Firan, "What are the Historians Trying to Do?" in Avraham Weinryb, ed., *Historical Thinking A* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1985), pp. 235-260.

