Speaking by Proxy

Can the story of the victims who perished in the Holocaust be adequately told? Clearly, those who perished cannot tell their own stories. But according to Primo Levi, the question has a particular significance in connection with the Muselmänner, those victims of the Holocaust who were destroyed as human beings before they died biologically. “Even if they had paper and pen, the submerged would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, compare and express themselves” (The Drowned and the Saved 64). The story of the way they ended their lives could only be told by others: “We who were favoured by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate, but also that of the others, the submerged; but this was a discourse on ‘behalf of third parties,’ the story of things seen from close by, not experienced personally” (64); the victims speak “by proxy” (64).

Parameters of Evaluation and the Case of Kathe, Always Lived in Norway

Responding to this situation, some work on the Holocaust has generated a hierarchy of representations and parameters of evaluation according to
which the privileged account is the one closest to the story we cannot have: that of the victim speaking about his or her experience at the time and in the very place of the extermination. In Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi’s words: “The voices that have been heard are measured, then, by degrees of access, by the privileged status of the witness or the act of witnessing and by relative claims to authenticity and artistic licence” (53). Thus, accounts that are nearer to the gas chamber, as measured along the three main variables of time, place, and person, are deemed to be more authoritative than those produced further away from it. In turn, this principle of authority by proximity privileges documentary forms of representation over imaginative ones, a point that seems to hit fictional accounts particularly hard: whatever authority they have will not be grasped by applying this principle.

Scholars such as Ezrahi and Geoffrey Hartman, however, have persuasively argued against this principle by rejecting its premise that there is a single standard against which to judge efforts to engage with the experience of the Holocaust.¹ Hartman succinctly expresses the alternative view, which I take as my point of departure. “To ‘transmit the dreadful experience’ [as Aharon Appelfeld puts it]² we need all our memory institutions: history writing as well as testimony, testimony as well as art” (155).

In this chapter I will analyze a biography of a Holocaust victim that might throw light on the importance of not using testimony by victims or witnesses as the measuring rod for all Holocaust narratives. This biography, Espen Søbye’s Kathe, Always Lived in Norway, is by no means unique in taking an unknown victim of the Holocaust as its biographee,³ but thus far it is virtually unknown to the wider international readership of Holocaust literature. Eight years after its publication in Norwegian in 2003, however, it has already established itself as a seminal work on the Norwegian participation in the Holocaust. A source-based biography written approximately sixty years after the deportation and death of Kathe Lasnik by a non-Jewish Norwegian author with no personal connections to the Holocaust, Kathe, Always Lived in Norway can make no claims to the nearness to the events similar to that of testimonies. In her criticism of the principle of authority by proximity, Ezrahi emphasizes the way in which distance invites imaginative (and especially fictional) modes of telling into the exploration of the significance of the Holocaust (60–64). However, Søbye’s biography quite consciously does not venture into imaginative modes of writing, and I shall argue that his decision to not fill in the many gaps in Kathe Lasnik’s story is crucial to the ethical and aesthetic power of his narrative.⁴ Before I turn to analyze the biography, I need to place it in the broader context of thought on the Holocaust and memory.
War against Memory

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi presents the difficulties of remembering the Holocaust in terms that may help us get a better grasp of what is at stake in our effort to do just that. He suggests that “the entire history of the brief ‘millennial Reich’ can be reread as a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of memory, falsification of reality, negation of reality” (18). As I understand Levi, the term “war against memory” points partly to the malicious intention of the Nazi regime to obliterate from human memory what happened in the camps, expressed most directly in the destruction of evidence that could prove what had happened: crematoria that were used to burn dead bodies were also used to burn the files and lists that could prove the facts. Himmler, in a famous statement, explicitly stated that the Holocaust was “a page of glory in our history which has never been written and which will never be written” (quoted in Stark 192).

By juxtaposing the term “war against memory” with the term “negation of reality,” Levi highlights another aspect of the Holocaust: the very nature of the event itself seems to make it resistant to being remembered. The event seems to weaken the capacity of most parties involved to relate to this particular part of the past, and this weakness underlies a more general logic of oblivion that has impeded later attempts to come to terms with it. The various aspects of this logic of oblivion are well known to anyone familiar with the huge literature on the Holocaust, but let me just give a reminder of a few of them. First, there is the unwillingness of the perpetrators to face up to their participation in the atrocities: forgetting that it happened may seem the only way to live with the past. Second, there is the “traumatic impact” (Stark 197) of the Holocaust, the survivors finding it hard to articulate in words what happened without being crushed by those very words, and in some cases finding it just as hard to trust their own memories. “Everything that happened was so gigantic, so inconceivable, that the witness even seemed like a fabricator to himself” (Appelfeld, quoted in Hartman 124). And clearly the survivors who did break the silence were not helped by a frequent attitude of their audiences: sheer lack of interest. This attitude was actually anticipated in the prisoners’ collective dreams that Levi famously recounts and calls “the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story” (*If This Is a Man* 66). This lack of interest is perhaps best understood as another effect of the enormity of the Holocaust. Both the numbers killed and the harm done to each one as an individual contribute to weaken our capacity to face up to and stand by the facts, even for those of us who have no direct involvement in the events.

One way of taking Levi’s remark about the war on memory in *The Drowned and the Saved* is that he invites us to consider efforts to remember what hap-
pened in the concentration camps as acts, more specifically as acts of resistance or counter-acts in this war against memory, and consequently as ways of protecting both reality and our sense of it. However, this emphasis on protecting (our sense of) reality should not be taken to imply that the sole function of such counter-acts is to make available information about the past. Memory and memory institutions are not merely repositories of information; if they were, art would count as a memory institution only insofar as it provided facts, which it may or may not do, but providing facts is seldom all art does. More generally, different acts of remembering may differ in function, one single act may have more than one function, and in many cases the function(s) of a particular act of remembering cannot be determined independently of its context of utterance and its concern(s). The proximity to or distance from the Holocaust—in terms of time, space, and person—is one aspect of its context, and as such it may influence deeply both the form and the purpose of the act of remembering in question, but, again, it is only one aspect.

Seeing Holocaust narratives as acts of resistance in the war against memory helpfully foregrounds the distinction between the conditions of remembering the victims of the Holocaust and the significance of doing so. The obstacles to remembering the Holocaust may increase as the distance between the act of remembering and the remembered event increases. However, this distance does not necessarily diminish the significance—especially the ethical significance—of the act of remembrance. Quite the contrary: one may hold that those of us who have no personal memories of the Holocaust have a duty to remember its victims that one hesitates to ascribe to survivors. (What expressions this duty should take will certainly vary with where we stand in relation to the victims.)

If this line of reasoning holds, parameters of evaluation based solely on the principle of authority by proximity turn out to be counterproductive, to put it mildly. Rather than ranking the various accounts in relation to their nearness to the source, we should ask what significance, ethical or otherwise, we may attribute to each one of the acts of remembering that we encounter. I turn now to consider the ethical and aesthetic significance of Søbye’s biography of Kathe Lasnik.

A Biography Emerging from Statistics

The most surprising fact about Kathe, Always Lived in Norway is perhaps that it came to be written at all, that this ordinary girl has been subject to a biography sixty years after she, on November 26, 1942, was brought to the harbor in Oslo and taken onboard MS Donau together with 531 other Jews on
a journey that ended in Auschwitz-Birkenau on December 1 that year. Who is the author, and how did this girl who died at fifteen come to his notice?

Espen Søbye is a philosopher by training who for many years worked in Statistics Norway, the Norwegian Central Bureau of Statistics. In the late 1990s, while still employed by Statistics Norway, he was approached by a colleague on behalf of a historian at Bronx University, William Seltzer. Seltzer was doing research into what role statistics had played when Jews were identified, located, and arrested during World War II, and he wanted Søbye to comment upon the portion of his paper dealing with Norway. Søbye discovered that the Norwegian historiography of the war had little to offer on this issue: it had hardly been dealt with at all, and he decided to do the research himself.

Going through the bundle of forms that all the Norwegian Jews were asked to fill out in 1942, “Questionnaire for Jews in Norway,” 1,419 forms altogether, one particular form catches his attention, that of a fifteen-year-old girl, Kathe Rita Lasnik. On the question “How long have you lived in Norway?” she had responded, in her young girl’s handwriting: “Always lived in Norway.” Looking for more information about her long after his research project was finished, Søbye finds her name on a commemoration relief at her school, Fagerborg, a relief dedicated to those who “gave their life for Norway during the war 1940–1945.” Her name is also on the memorial of the altogether 620 Jewish Holocaust victims from the Oslo area in the Jewish cemetery at Helsfyr. Finally, he reads a short notice about her in the Norwegian state’s four-volume work, Our Fallen, which officially commemorates the Norwegian war victims. He finds few other traces of her.

Søbye decides to ask to see her file in the National Archive in which confiscated assets of the deported Jews were kept. The file, however, turns out to be empty. Nothing whatsoever is kept in the box: not a small collection of books, no toys, no birth certificate, nothing at all. Reflecting on the sadness of a person’s being remembered only for the way she died (“I thought it was terrible that she was remembered only as a victim” [6]), Søbye decides to find out everything possible about Kathe Lasnik and to tell her story. The narrative Kathe, Always Lived in Norway is the outcome of this decision. Regarded as a counter-act in the war against memory, it is a narrative deeply marked by its point of departure: the author’s concern with statistics (picking Kathe out from a vast number of victims of the Holocaust) and the lack of readily available information about her.

**Interacting Story Lines**

To see how this point of departure matters to the narrative regarded as a
counter-act in the war against memory, we need a more detailed picture of its structure. There are three significant story lines in this narrative, the interaction of which is crucial to its overall effect. The core of the narrative is certainly the account of the short life and abrupt death of Kathe Lasnik herself, lodged in quite a bit of family history and a general account of the situation of the Jews in Oslo in the first decades of the twentieth century. This story line, which for convenience I will call the Kathe Lasnik Line, also recounts the growth in anti-Semitism in Norway during the 1930s and is brought to a close with the deportation and death of the whole family except two sisters who managed to escape to Sweden. The closure of this story line marks the opening of the second, the one telling how the Jews were treated by the Norwegian state during and after the war. This story line, which I will call the Norwegian Response Line, starts with an account of the way in which the deportation was prepared for and carried out, with a special emphasis on the deportation of Kathe Lasnik and her family. The high point of this line of action is the treason trial just after the war against Knut Rød, the head of the police in Oslo who was in charge of the police operation that led to the arrest of the Norwegian Jews.

The third line of action focuses not on the biographee and the series of events that led to her death, but rather on the researcher himself and his struggle with his material. It fleshes out the series of events that led to the biography's being written, but above all it revolves around the author's difficulties with finding sources on which to base his story. (This line of action makes *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway* similar to the narratives Irene Kacandes discusses in her essay in this volume.) This third line, which I will call the Research Line, is placed first in the discourse, but in the chronology of the fabula it is temporally removed from the two others, starting almost sixty years after the closure of the Kathe Lasnik Line and the opening of the Norwegian Response Line. What precisely is its function? Is it just another expression of the widespread, epistemologically grounded, skeptical attitude toward the genre of biography? Is its function to give the self-reflexive author room for thoughts about the impossibility of writing the life story of some other person while he is doing just that?

**Undermining the Moral High Ground**

*The Interaction of the Research and the Norwegian Response Story Lines*

As we shall see, the Research Line has several functions, and one of them is to interact with the two other story lines so as to establish what I take to be
the two main areas of concern in the work. One of these concerns is closely linked to the result of Søbye’s historiographic inquiry that led to the biography’s being written: Why has the fate of the Jews played such a minor part in Norwegian historians’ concern with the war? The answer is suggested in the Norwegian Response Line but requires some contextualization to be grasped. Because Norway was an occupied country, both the historiography and the more popular historical memory of the Norwegian experience in World War II have revolved around the conflict between collaborators and resisters. Who belongs to what group may not always be obvious, but the overall picture has been pretty clear: resistance to the occupants is the moral high ground, collaboration with the Nazis a matter of treason.

By making Knut Rød—the head of the state police force in Oslo and in charge of rounding up the Jews in Norway—the central figure of the Norwegian Response Line, Søbye complicates this picture considerably. Rød was acquitted in the treason trial after the war because he was presumed to have given practical support to the Norwegian Resistance movement. The fact that he had played a major role in the deportation of the Jews was described as a relatively minor offense compared to the actions he had taken to save ethnic Norwegian lives. Men with high positions in the Resistance testified in his favor. After examining the outcome of the treason case, the various arguments which Rød, his defense council, and some witnesses brought to his defense, Søbye more than suggests that both the court and the Resistance revealed an attitude to the Jews that was not as far removed from that which motivated the Holocaust as one would like to think. He quotes the court sociologist Knut Sveri to this effect: “In my view it raises the most uncomfortable thought that the court did not view Norwegian Jews as equal to other Norwegians” (153).

Through his analysis of the acquittal of Knut Rød, Søbye brings to light a feature of the Norwegian postwar consciousness that is both painful and embarrassing. As a nation and as a people, we Norwegians have had our own quite specific motivation for letting the fate of the Norwegian Jews during World War II fade into oblivion. The Norwegian contribution to the Holocaust does not fit the general moral map that has governed our picture of the war and our participation in it. This racist undercurrent in the Norwegian collective consciousness is brought to the foreground in Søbye’s work by the interaction between the story lines. The Norwegian Response Line enables the reader to understand the significance of the lack of information about the role of statistics in the deportation of the Norwegian Jews that is central to the Research Line: we recognize the connection between how the Jews were treated during the war, how the people responsible for the deportation were
treated immediately after the war, and the popular and historiographic lack of attention to the fate of the Norwegian Jews during the postwar decades.

In other words, Søbye structures the biography so that it brings to the surface not only the Norwegian collective indifference to the fate of the Jews but also a sense of shame and guilt for this indifference. The self-reflexive Research Line, in which the lack of available information, sources, and research is thematized, is crucial to establishing this critical perspective on the historiography and collective memory of World War II in Norway. Being a non-Jewish Norwegian, the biographer is able to give voice to this moral consciousness, and the fact that the biography is written at the distance of many decades from the event itself gives urgency to the telling of the story. It comes across as a belated but necessary confrontation with Norway’s particular reasons for ignoring the fate of the Norwegian Jews.

**Remembering the Victim as an Individual**

*The Interaction of the Research and the Kathe Lasnik Story Lines*

Being vital for the biography’s capacity to reveal the shortcomings of the Norwegian war historiography, the narrative’s point of departure in statistics plays a crucial role also in relation to another of its aspects: its ambition to remember Kathe Lasnik not only as a victim but as a person, as an individual. In my view, this is the most important aspect of this particular biography read as a counter-act in the war against memory. Consequently, the Kathe Lasnik Story Line is the central component of the narrative, though, as we shall see, its force depends on its interactions with the Research Line. By singling out one victim from a statistical database containing information about 1,419 Norwegian Jews, and ultimately one victim among six million Jews, the work confronts a general difficulty in our response to the Holocaust victims. On the one hand, the unbelievably high number of victims seems to stand in the way of our taking on board the fact that each one of them is an individual. Each one of the victims, each name on the commemoration reliefs, seems to “drown” among the many. On the other hand, the significance of the high numbers cannot be grasped unless we insist on trying to encompass in our mind that each one of them is a particular human being. Thus, if we wish to hear what the statistics tell us, we have to make an effort to remember each one of the victims as the particular human being he or she is.

I will return to some of the difficulties involved in the idea of remembering the perished victim as this particular human being and the response to these difficulties in *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway*. Let me just note that
the importance of grasping the victims as individuals becomes all the more pressing in light of the efforts of the Nazis not only to kill them, but to obliter-
date them as individuals, as human beings who are to be remembered: giving them numbers instead of names, robbing them of all personal belongings, and otherwise dehumanizing them. The testimony of survivors is so valuable in large part because it works against this obliteration of their individuality. This point is eloquently expressed by Hartman who in turn quotes Aharon Appelfeld: “Testimony [. . .] considered not just as a product but also as a humanizing and transactive process, [. . .] works on the past to rescue [in the words of Appelfeld] the ‘individual, with his own face and proper name’ from the place of terror where that face and name were taken away” (Hart-
man 155). Hartman has in mind the recorded testimonies at Yale, and he emphasizes the importance of the voice in these recordings: “Though speech may stumble, get ahead of itself, temporarily lose its way, it is a voice as well as memory that is recovered from the moments of silence and powerlessness” (155). Being able to speak in one’s own voice is here envisaged as an over-
coming of powerlessness, the testimony embodying the victim’s capacity to mark his or her own status as an individual.

If the testimonies of the survivors are regarded as a sign of the partial failure of the Nazi regime to obliterate the victims as human beings who can tell their own story, it is important to bear in mind that the perished victims remain human beings who are entitled to being recognized and remembered as such. As noted before, Primo Levi in The Drowned and the Saved makes the point that the Muselmänner had lost their capacity to express themselves as individuals before they died, and this may make it harder for us to remem-
ber them as individuals. But their status as human beings to be remembered is not affected by their loss of capacity for self-expression, and the difficulties of remembering the Holocaust victims as individuals in no way reduce the force of the injunction to do so. On the contrary, insofar as these difficulties spring from the perpetrators’ intentions to obliterate the victims as individu-
als, the ethical importance of the effort to remember them as such may be regarded as all the more pressing.

Kathe, Always Lived in Norway can be understood as emerging directly from this tension between the difficulties of remembering and the injunction to do so: Søbye’s urge to explore Kathe Lasnik’s life, to find out everything he possibly can about her, is fueled by the empty file. It is as if the subject of the biography withdraws from the author at the outset of his project, and the ensuing book is his response to this withdrawal.

As it turns out, the empty file is emblematic of the obstacles the project will meet. Søbye discovers that hardly any of his oral sources have much to
say. Kathe Lasnik’s school mates, her friends and nearest neighbors are all incapable of providing much information about her. “Why was it so difficult to remember Kathe Lasnik? The act of remembrance was difficult for her friends too. Had the Holocaust also eliminated other memories? It seemed that way” (12). It was as if “the weight of what happened” (Hartman 27) had worked directly on their capacity to remember. This effect of the event on the ability to remember proves an obstacle also in Søbye’s meeting with her two sisters, Jenny Bermann and Elise Bassist, whom he traces to the United States and to Israel, respectively. They turn out to be rather unhelpful as sources, not because of a lack of goodwill, but because talking about her turned out to be too painful. “Kathe Lasnik’s two sisters answered my questions, but it was difficult to probe. I could feel the pain of once again having to recall the memory of the little sister and the time they had spent together. I had not been prepared for this—that my efforts to find out as much as possible about Kathe Lasnik would be hindered by the pain of remembrance” (10).

The Effect of Adding Nothing

Thus the hope of being able to obtain the information needed to tell Kathe Lasnik’s life story is time and again frustrated by the dynamics of oblivion inherent in the Holocaust. What are the consequences of this lack of sources on which to build a biography for Søbye’s project? Does he fail in his attempt to remember Kathe Lasnik as an individual? Is the value of his attempt limited to providing insight into the difficulty of doing so? In my view the answer to both questions is no, and the clue to this answer lies in Søbye’s attitude to and handling of the meager sources in this narrative. His general method is to respond to the difficulties of finding informative sources by sticking very closely to those that he finds, to glean as much as he can from them, and to stop there. He knows very little, and he adds virtually nothing. He does hypothesize a little every now and then on the basis of the sources, but in a careful, inconclusive manner, with very little propositional force invested in his words.

One effect of this method is his dependence on official statistics and publicly available data. These sources allow him to give a rather comprehensive account of the wider social and geographical world in which Kathe Lasnik lived. We learn about the wave of immigration that brought Kathe Lasnik’s parents to Norway from Vilnius in Russia in 1908, the general living conditions of Jews in Oslo, their struggle to make a living, the quite sharp anti-Semitism they experienced, the legislative and economic conditions of a
metal sheet worker rising from apprenticeship to owning his own shop, and the trades Kathe Lasnik’s sisters were involved in. We also get a fairly comprehensive picture of the various social milieus Kathe Lasnik experienced during her childhood, as she moved into new neighborhoods and attended new schools. We get a broad and detailed picture of the world she lived in, we get a rich circumstantial backdrop, which in itself is not irrelevant, but what we do not get is an account of her various responses to these circumstances. We get to know her social world, but important aspects of how she acted in this world, how she interacted with it, are for the most part missing.

There are, however, exceptions to this pattern. A few episodes, the narration of which depends on oral sources, show her awareness of her “otherness.” Most telling, perhaps, is her awkwardness when being placed in the same class as Celia Century, a Jewish girl from a more intellectual and self-conscious family. Celia Century was proud of her Jewishness and able to turn her otherness into a strength. Although the two of them were placed in the same class so that each would have a classmate with the same background, the move turned out to be fundamentally unhelpful for both. Celia Century’s self-assertive behavior exposes Kathe Lasnik’s otherness in a way she has tried to avoid, whereas Kathe Lasnik’s strategy of making as little point about her otherness as possible marks Celia Century out for the other children as particularly difficult and unnecessarily self-assertive. In consequence, Celia Century turns aggressively against Kathe Lasnik in the schoolyard, but a classmate comes to her rescue.

This is an episode that clearly individualizes Kathe Lasnik, and it brings us as readers closer to her as a person by revealing how she in her attitude and actions longed for being one among the many, how she sought inclusion and integration, and how she feared exclusion. This picture is strengthened by other episodes, such as this one: “One winter afternoon in 1939, Kathe Lasnik took off on skis together with Fride Prytz and Ingrid Prytz, the daughters of the priest from the fourth floor. Suddenly Kathe Lasnik stopped and asked: ‘Do you want to play with me?’ The mere question surprised the sisters. They played with everybody, but understood that the girl from the ground floor was not used to taking this for granted” (70). There are also episodes without the emphasis on her insecurity, simply portraying her as integrated and (we assume) happy: “Turid Ekestrand, who lived at no. 6 Schultz’ gate, accompanied Kathe Lasnik home every day from teacher Heyerdahl Larsen’s flat to do homework together. Since her father was active in the fight against the Wehrmacht, Turid Ekestrand had gone with her mother and siblings to a house the family owned on Ringerike. She had brought her schoolbooks with her so that she could do her homework, but the house burnt down together
with her books. For that reason Turid Ekestrand did not have schoolbooks when she arrived back in the city at the beginning of May, but she followed Kathe Lasnik home anyway. They sat together in the girls’ room and Dora Lasnik came with biscuits and even a sugar trifle cake for the diligent students” (76–77). On other occasions, the cultural difference between Kathe Lasnik and her fellow pupils has an impact on their relationship: “While the rest of the children attended classes on instruction in the Lutheran Protestant religion, Kathe Lasnik left class. Karin Swärd always wondered where Kathe Lasnik went and how she spent her time while the class had instruction in the Lutheran Protestant religion. Did she wait around in the hallway or did she walk about in the schoolyard? She had a strong urge to ask [Kathe], but could not force herself to do it” (62). On the whole we learn very little about how her Jewish customs interfered with the routines of her Protestant surroundings. One schoolmate, however, “remembered that Kathe Lasnik had eaten fish pudding every Saturday. This was her way of Honouring the Jewish day of rest” (64). In such passages we see both how valuable the oral sources are to give us a sense of Kathe Lasnik as this particular person and how insufficient they are to give a fuller picture of her. They give important glimpses into her life and responses, but on the whole her schoolmates don’t remember enough, or they have not been close enough to her to allow a more comprehensive picture of her to emerge. We never feel familiar with her in the way that we do with the subjects of conventional biographies.

The tempting way to tell the story of a person about whom so little is known, about whom the sources are so few and so silent or nearly silent, is to individualize her by fictionalizing her, by giving her thoughts and feelings, ups and downs, blessings and curses we take to belong to any individual human being. Søbye resists the temptation and, in fact, goes in the opposite direction. He respects the limitations of his sources: the distance between the sources and the biographee is reflected in the narrative. He tells a story with many gaps, and he leaves those gaps open; the gaps are part of what we are invited to see and acknowledge.

The result is a biography with a strangely vacuous central character. What is the point of this strategy? What is an adequate response on the part of the reader? My suggestion is that we take the respect for Kathe Lasnik as an individual to be expressed in just that distance that the narrative maps out between us, the readers, and her. The implicit claim seems to be that to equip her with an inner life that has no basis in the sources, to pretend that we can know her intimately, is in fact to fail to respect and acknowledge her as an individual, as a person with her own set of thoughts, feelings, and responses. Søbye’s respect for Kathe Lasnik as this particular person with a name and a
face is expressed in the acknowledgment that she cannot be brought within our reach: in an important sense she remains unknowable to us.

**Documentation and Narration**

Søbye’s attitude to his sources also affects the narrative discourse in a way that brings out more succinctly what is attempted and achieved in this biography. Let me explain what I mean by illuminating another important feature of the way in which the different story lines interact. The opening chapter, “The Empty File,” is dedicated to the Research Story Line. In the second chapter the Kathe Lasnik Story Line takes center stage. But because the sources are so meager and lacking in information about her, the telling of her story takes place in a constant dialogue with the sources, a strategy that means that the Research Line and the Kathe Lasnik Line overlap more or less constantly.

This feature of the narrative creates an intense interaction between documentation and narration. This technique comes to a peak in the role that the questionnaire for Jews living in Norway plays in the narrative. It is central to all three of the lines of action: it is crucial to the Research Line in that it sets the whole process of investigating Kathe’s life in motion; crucial to the Kathe Lasnik Line in the sense that the filling in of the form was part of the procedure that eventually led to her deportation and death; and crucial to the Norwegian Response Line insofar as it is vital to the rounding up of the Norwegian Jews and as it becomes emblematic of the racism the Norwegian Jews were subject to.

The document holds a special place in the work for other reasons as well. One is that it contains one of the very few utterances in the book that with certainty can be traced back to Kathe Lasnik herself, the phrase “Always lived in Norway.” Søbye reflects on why she wrote just this answer. Clearly it was redundant; it gave a piece of information that could be inferred from her answers to questions already answered. “She must have answered ‘Always lived in Norway’ because she thought this might help protect her. ‘Always lived in Norway’ was a prayer, ‘I am one of you, you are not going to hurt me, are you?’” (5). Indeed, there are other possible interpretations, such as “You take me for an outsider—but I belong here,” or something along this line: “There is no other place to which I belong, so don’t send me away.” However we interpret the utterance, it gets an expressive power we normally do not ascribe to documents, because we know these words are hers, and because of the contrast between her response and the use to which the information in the document was put.
Kathe Lasnik’s answer in the questionnaire also features in the title of the book. The full title is not a direct quote from the questionnaire, but Søbye’s melding of two of her responses. The comma is the only part of the phrase that belongs solely to Søbye. This authorial sequencing of her words allows us to hear the author’s voice containing within itself the voice of Kathe. The title is an example of Bakhtin’s concept of double-voiced discourse, one that with reference to Dorrit Cohn’s term “psycho-narration” we might call “docu-narration,” a kind of narration in which we characteristically hear both the mind of the person filling in the form and the narrator’s voice.

Being double-voiced in this way, and pointing to the story told as much as to the document forming the basis of this biography, the title gives us the prime example of the author’s attitude to and handling of the sources in this narrative: he uses the interaction of the documentation and the narration to bring us as close to this person as the sources permit. The reproduction of the form itself, showing the crucial sentence “Alltid vært i Norge” [Always lived in Norway] in Kathe Lasnik’s own handwriting, strengthens our sense of her being this particular person, but it also reinforces our sense that she is somehow unknowable to us: perhaps we never get closer to her as a person than we do when confronted by this particular document.

This interaction between documentation and narration carries over so as to integrate several of the other paratextual elements directly in the main narrative. The notes appear as part of the Research Line of the narrative and so do The Epilogue (in which the sources are accounted for) and the rest of the documents reproduced in the book. Some of these documents fill out the picture of the general circumstances of Kathe Lasnik’s life, while many of them, most significantly the black-and-white photos of her (alone, one of them being on the cover of the book, or together with family, friends, or schoolmates) contribute to the reader’s sense of her individuality. Again the interaction between the Research Line and the Kathe Lasnik Line colors how we see these paratextual elements: we see them both as contributing to the picture of the life of the young girl and as sources for the struggling author, a way for Søbye to integrate the struggle to tell the story into the telling. But Søbye does not make his struggles a focal point of interest: the narrative never turns into a mystery story in which the author becomes the detective trying to solve the puzzle, nor does it turn into a by-now-familiar, postmodern, self-conscious meditation on the general problems of grasping the elusive “other.” Rather than diverting the reader’s attention from the main story about Kathe Lasnik, the perpetual presence of the Research Line is geared toward making us all the more aware of the nature of Kathe Lasnik’s fate and
to help us acknowledge, as an important feature of this fate, the unbridgeable gap between us and her.

The Significance of Remembering Kathe Lasnik

It is by handling his sources in this particular way that Søbye shapes his resistance to the oblivion that the Holocaust prescribed for Kathe Lasnik. He develops an aesthetics and an ethics of remembering the individual in which what we cannot know about this person looms almost as large as what we do know. Her remaining in an important sense unknown and unknowable to us is part of how this biography teaches us to see her and acknowledge her existence as an individual. In this way the biography seems to point beyond the initial project: to save this one individual victim from the statistics that threaten to drown her as an individual. Her remaining largely unknown to us by the end of the reading in fact seems to reinforce the connection between the biography and the statistical material it emerged from. We are brought to reflect on the distinction between two different forms the acknowledgment of the perished victim as an individual may take: it may take the form of writing a narrative that grasps, or seeks to grasp the life story of this particular individual, or it may take the form of an acknowledgment that there is such a story to be told, whether or not we know it.

One effect of the author’s respect for the limits of the possibility of knowing Kathe is that her biography throws light on our relation to all those whose fate she shared, all those who in the statistics remain one among the millions of people who perished in the Holocaust. All of them are human beings with a history that we mostly do not know. In fact, for the vast majority of victims of the Holocaust we have far less to go on than in the case of Kathe Lasnik, and less than we have in the case of the victims named on reliefs and memorials: we cannot even identify an individual whose story we do not know. To acknowledge the reality of these human beings is the only resistance we can muster against the willful obliteration of their memory, and the only way in which we can mark the impossibility of obliterating them as individuals.

We can come at this important ethical point by reflecting further on the material that Søbye had to work with. From the sources available to Søbye and made available to us, both in the text and in the paratexts, we can make the qualified guess that Kathe Lasnik was a completely ordinary person. Not only was she too young to have left many marks on the world around her; she also comes across as someone who had no ambition to do so. There was nothing outstanding about her to that point in her life; she was not particularly talented, beautiful, or striking in any other respect. Most likely she was
just a nice, shy girl, neither particularly popular nor strongly disliked. As the confrontation with Celia Century shows: she was different, but unable—at that age, at least—to turn her difference into an asset. In social contexts in which she detected the danger of exposure, she sought invisibility.

Ironically, in view of the legacy of remarkable young Jewish women in the Holocaust literature, Kathe Lasnik almost stands out as the different one. She is not Anne Frank. Nor is she Ruth Maier, the young Austrian woman who came to Norway as a refugee before the war, and who was deported to Auschwitz on MS Donau on November 26, 1942, together with Kathe Lasnik. When Maier’s diaries finally were published in 2007, revealing an astonishing talent for writing and thinking, she was immediately named “the Norwegian Anne Frank,” and one wonders what would have become of her had she been allowed to live.

Kathe Lasnik does not belong to this group of promising Jewish women whose early and brutal death represents a great loss also to the wider culture. On the other hand, Søbye’s biography reminds us of something that may not stand out so clearly in connection with Anne Frank and Ruth Maier: the importance or significance of her being a person is not in any way connected with her importance or significance as a person. There is no horrible loss connected with Kathe Lasnik’s death over and beyond the loss of her. In other words, what ultimately gives the injunction to remember her, this particular person, its force is what she shares with all the other victims of the Holocaust, and indeed with any one of us. In virtue of Kathe Lasnik’s character and Espen Søbye’s shrewd narrative strategy, Kathe, Always Lived in Norway combines a craving for respect for the particularity of this one human being with a strong conception of the common humanity—the term “common” here pointing to both the ordinary and the shared—of which any racism is a denial, and of which the anti-Semitism that culminated in the Holocaust is a particularly brutal and evil denial.9

Notes

1. In addition to being an obstacle to understanding the significance of the broad variety of non-testimonial accounts of the Holocaust, this line of thought leads, as Ezrachi (“Questions of Authenticity”) convincingly demonstrates, to absurd conclusions for our judgment of testimonies. A poem written in the concentration camp is in principle worth more than the poet’s revision of it some time after the war (cf. Ezrachi 54–55). We should be able to acknowledge the special significance it may have for us that a certain text was written in the camps, under the very special circumstances that prevailed there, without turning that proximity to the camps into the only relevant criterion by which we evaluate and compare Holocaust representations.
2. Hartman quotes from Appelfeld’s *Beyond Despair: Three Lectures and a Conversation with Philip Roth*, 22.

3. Other examples of biographies that reconstruct the life of a victim unknown to the author are Erick Hackl, *Abschied von Sidonie (Farewell Sidonia)*, and Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder*.

4. At this point it is markedly different from, for example, Modiano’s *Dora Bruder*, in which the author’s imaginative engagement in what might have happened to his biographee, and indeed also his partial identification with her, play a significant role.


6. Or perhaps the term “docu-presentation” is more apt, as the sequence occurs in a presentational paratext rather than in the narration as such. However, given the tendency in this text to let the Research Line of the narrative encompass the paratexts, it may not be so far-fetched after all to regard it as part of the narration.

7. Søbye has in conversation explained that the narrative first was written without the Research Line. He thought it was a shame that Kathe Lasnik’s sisters were relegated to the footnotes as sources, and the Research Line grew from this wish to let the sisters play a part in the narrative itself. As the Research Line developed, it produced a narrative that subsumes and transforms those original endnotes.


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**Works Cited**


