Moving Testimonies

“Unhomed Geography” and the Holocaust

Documentary of Return

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An older Jewish émigré was asked why he had joined a tour to Auschwitz, Majdanek, the Warsaw ghetto, and the Polish village whence he came. Why would he travel years later from his adoptive home in the United States to these Eastern European sites of killing, sickness, and survival? “The same reason I did the first time,” he replied with a shrug, “I had to” (Bukiet 129). Or consider an acclaimed special episode of Oprah Winfrey’s popular talk show in which her guest is Elie Wiesel and the venue Auschwitz. The two figures walk arm in arm through the camp, their boots crunching on the drifted snow. “When here . . . the professor speaks very softly, allowing silence to have its space,” explains Winfrey in voice-over. Then, as the day wears on, she consoles him: “It cannot be easy for you to make this journey.” “I wouldn’t have done it with anyone,” he replies. Perhaps he meant to say he wouldn’t have done it with “just anyone.” In any case, the statement signals not only Wiesel’s appreciation of Winfrey’s sensitivity but also the concomitant difficulty and necessity of his presence in that place of death. Conducted on foot and filmed for national and international circulation, this affecting interview constitutes a moving testimony of return.

All around the world people are picking up and traveling to places they expected never to see again, and this powerful impulse to go back to a site
of origin or catastrophe, just to visit or for good, is finding eloquent expression in conversation, print, and screen media. Where previous scholars have offered inspiring exegeses of post–World War II exilic memory and return in literature and photography (Bukiet; Gilbert; Jacobson; M. Hirsch; and Hirsch and Spitzer “‘We Would Never Have Come’” and Ghosts of Home, Kugelmass, Palmer, Suleiman), the current chapter seeks to designate and study a corpus of documentary films that are dramatically shaped by the European visits of Jewish refugees of Hitler’s Holocaust to places from which they have previously departed, emigrated, or fled; places where they survived; or places from which they were unwillingly removed or rescued.

Such a “documentary of return” may begin casually when someone grabs a video camera on the way out the door, or more formally with a concept and agreement between producers and travelers. In neither case, though, is the film a mere record of an autonomous itinerary. Rather, as in Jean Rouch’s and Edgar Morin’s cinema verité creation, Chronique d’un été (1960), where various gatherings were held for the purpose of filming the ensuing discussion, so too in each of these film or digital media projects, words and gestures are brought into being, and place itself is enacted.

The filmmaker also travels. Shoshana Felman has observed in her widely recognized and aptly titled chapter, “The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah,” that along with Simon Srebnik’s reluctant return from Israel to Poland to testify sur place (as one of two survivors among 400,000 murdered in gas vans), the documentary naturally required the “no less difficult biographical and geographical return (a return in space) of [Claude] Lanzmann” himself for a sustained decade of filming (257). Nor is the viewer left behind. The motion picture itself is “the very synthesis of seeing and going—a place where seeing is going” and where the cinema spectator is mobilized for “site-seeing” across a “geopsychic” landscape (Bruno 245, 15–16). It follows, therefore, that the Holocaust documentary of return, by its very premise, represents an over-determined and crucial case of cinema’s synthetic seeing-going.

With this activity, the possibility of a shift opens up: from Holocaust testimony studies as a mentally recursive and diasporic paradigm in which verbal and written testimonies are conducted, filmed, and archived after the fact and far from the catastrophic event itself, to testimony as a matter of the here and now. I concentrate, therefore, on filmed, situated testimonies delivered verbally or bodily from a significant site and in the presence of others; for the places to which these (auto)biographical travelers return have persisted all the while. They have their own regional histories, practices, physical situations, and, importantly, current inhabitants.
Physical location matters deeply to the full impact of Holocaust testi-
monies of return, but so do insights about the psychic dimensions and the
unassimilability of place and occurrence. As Cathy Caruth has written, “The
impact of a traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be
simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single
place or time" or, putting it differently, “in connection with another place and
time” (9, 8, emphasis mine). Even as locals and returnees reunite in a “fatal
environment," this anti-essentializing view of place, hinted at by Caruth
and further developed in the works of critical human geographers, remains
crucial (Rogoff, Tuan; see also Walker “Rights and Return”). The ground of
testimony sur place like exilic space, but not to be conflated with it is always
already “other.”

This chapter will proceed with a discussion of some of the ethical com-
plexities of situated testimony, unfilmed and filmed, turning then to the
analysis of two significant, and rhetorically different, Holocaust documenta-
tories of return: The Last Days (1998) and Hiding and Seeking (2004). In their
respective presentations of bodies and voices along country roads, at the
thresholds of childhood homes, and on sacred ground, these two nonfiction
narratives exemplify the felicities and complications of the mode. Analyz-
ing them, I seek to map the transposition and transmission of Holocaust
testimonies generally, across geographical distance, and into the audiovisual
space of the moving image.

Because I Had To
The Uses and Abuses of Private Journeys and “Holocaust Tourism”

Holocaust survivors may feel an “irresistible” urge to “go home” or return
to the camp (in either case, “to the fire”) as part of an ongoing traumatic
response to the shock of forcible removal (Brenner 157, 147). The actual
journey may be an enactment of certain “themes of attachment, loss, reunion,
and return home” (158). It may be experienced as a pilgrimage, however
triumphant (“to celebrate my survival in the place that tried to kill me”),
or, alternatively, “counterphobic” (“I felt empty, cheated . . . The Germans
succeeded in Mannheim. It certainly was Judenrein”) (Brenner 156 quoting
Michel 266, 208–9). In their critically insightful and personally generous
essay, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer use the occasion of their trip back to
her parents’ hometown of Chernivtsi (formerly Czernowitz) to explore the
feelings and formations of “nostalgia’s complicating other side” (83). “This
ambivalent desire to recall negative experiences at their place of happening,
and to transmit them to sympathetic listeners and co-witnesses,” they submit, “is a significant motivation for return journeys” (84).

Those with no personal connection to the Holocaust may also “venture back in time” (Bukiet 128) and place as a form of participation in the collective impulse and effort to memorialize, as hallowed sites, the extermination camps of Eastern Europe. “The March of the Living,” started in 1988, along with other organized trips provide “an institutionalized way” for successive generations to commemorate and work through catastrophic past events (Brenner 160).

Deeply experienced by participants, the personal/genealogical trip and the more broadly touristic journey may also produce culturally and sometimes even historically meaningful findings, as when artifacts and long-buried memories (which may lead to further questions) are unearthed on-site. Hirsch and Spitzer report that only in Chernivtsi did Marianne’s mother Lotte tell how a soldier came to the door to announce their deportation from the ghetto, and only in Chernivtsi did her father Carl refuse this version of events, insisting, “‘Everyone was already outside, we all knew.’” As the authors remark, “[T]his detail, about the soldier, and the discrepancy between the two versions of the story, emerged there on site: we had never heard it before” (88).

The significance of such moments lies not only in what the returnees remember and narrate but also in the physical dimension of return as a particular kind of testimony and contemporary finding. Consider Edward S. Casey’s phenomenological insights: “the lived body is coterminous with place because it is by bodily movement that I find my way in place and take up habitation there,” and (extending beyond this chapter’s epigraph) “[m]oving in or through a given place, the body imports its own implaced past into its present experience: its ‘local history’ is literally a history of locales” (180, 194, emphasis mine). Or, as Joshua Hirsch offers through a filmic example, Chronique d’un été, “The past inheres in the relationship between the speaking body situated in a space of memory and the audible and visible signs of memory emanating from and written on the body” (67). The sequence he evokes is the famous one in which Marceline, a concentration camp survivor and part of the filmmaking collective, walks by herself at a distance from the camera and with a hidden tape recorder over her shoulder through the Place de la Concorde and Les Halles—speaking and softly singing her feelings and memories of deportation and return. The “modernist subjectivity” of the passage, Hirsch argues, is distinct from the more traditional voice of the first Shoah Foundation documentary, Survivors of the Holocaust (1996), in which interviews are conducted in a “‘safe’ interior location” (68). “In the
testimony of this [earlier] witness,” he recognizes, “we discover an archive of the past” (67).

Such “returns in space” may also catalyze encounters that are simultaneously new and seeded with past associations: transferential, we might say, for the play of earlier conflicts that remerge in the context of a current relationship. Pointing to the gestures and comments made by Polish residents of Chełmno when the largely silent Srebnik returned to their midst, noting the prevailing anti-Semitism that must in the past have enabled Jewish genocide, Shoshana Felman explains that “[t]he film makes testimony happen—happen inadvertently as a second Holocaust” (267). Or, as Linda Williams elaborates, filmmakers who stage these types of encounters “do not so much represent that past as they reanimate it in images of the present” (17). What I would like to emphasize here are the spatial, bodily, and sometimes, but not always, verbal dimensions of situated testimony for film, video, and digital media: the fact of filmed presence as a kind of a kinesthetic historiography.

This is not to underestimate the revelations made to relatives and other companions on-site without a camera. What I would say, though, is that the perceived indelibility of the filmic and videographic media encourages or exacerbates the testimonial impulse. From Hirsch and Spitzer’s discussion of Lotte’s observation made for the first time in Chernivtsi and (consequently) disputed for the first time in Chernivtsi, we may conclude that the onus of factual accuracy was, if not imported, then at least enhanced by the presence of Leo Spitzer’s video camera. “We have to tell the same story,” Carl insisted, for posterity (88). On one level and by its very nature, the project of a return documentary is to occasion testimony, be it spoken, gestural, or silent.

These, then, are some of the intrinsic qualities and productive uses of situated testimony. But the “abuses” alluded to in the section heading are also pertinent because return journeys are undoubtedly open to ethical, as well as practical, challenges. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer acknowledge that while “affectionate longings for earlier stages and scenes” are complicated, real, and enduring, the feelings and discourses around the return journey still do reveal a propensity for “indiscriminate idealization of past time and lost place that had angered nostalgia’s critics” (82–83).

Jack Kugelmass, for his part, critiques the “mythic” meaning of certain “missions” that “begin by visiting Poland (thus entering the abyss of despair) and then conclude by touring Israel (thus experiencing redemption)” for failing to recognize disturbing or contradictory present-day realities (211). Even more pointedly critical of Holocaust tourism or “atrocity heritage,” G. L. Ashworth characterizes the oft-stated motive for visiting the sites of
concentration camps—to prevent the recurrence of similar genocides—as “global humanitarian propaganda” (363–64). “Victimization as a founding mythology has played a central role in state-building,” he opines; “[t]here are . . . dangers inherent in a dominating sense of past injustice [such that it] may not be an ideal paradigm for the guidance of future action (363).”

A source of the problem is the co-presence of three communities at odds with one another in the business of Jewish heritage tourism: “the world-wide Jewish community,” “the wider Polish nation,” and “the existing local inhabitants” (366). Since there are few Jews currently living in the area Ashworth takes as his example (Kraków–Kazimierz), and since the local inhabitants are not middle-class Polish Gentiles but rather people from “among the poorest groups in the city” including many “re-housed migrants displaced from eastern territories lost in 1945,” the much-needed urban renewal would have to go far beyond the local economy of restaurants, souvenir shops, information sites, and memorials catering to tourists. “The presence of a resuscitated Jewish heritage,” Ashworth submits, “raises not only the question of ‘whose heritage?’ but also more immediately [and] threateningly ‘whose property?’” (366).

Without buying into the animosity of Ashworth’s brand of anti-Zionism, we may still recognize the relationship between the redemptive tendencies of some Holocaust narratives and the wider cultural critique of nostalgic fundamentalism. The territorial claims of a village, a people, or a nation may well function as naïve or self-serving; as a form of “restorative nostalgia” (Svetlana Boym’s term); or worse, as a rationale for xenophobic nationalism. The affinities among homeland, “ethnic purity,” and so-called hereditary rights may be murderous indeed (Marciniak 66, Naficy). But these complexities are all the more reason why it is important not to abandon in the rush for critical footing the historiographic, geographic, and ethical significance of place attachment. Indeed, by virtue of its necessarily spatial and temporal unfolding, and because it engages the bodies and imaginations of literal and armchair travelers, the documentary film or video of return has tremendous potential to stage very tangibly the pulsions and problems of the contested territories of the Holocaust and beyond.

**The Last Days**

On the very ground where the wheels rolled, Bill Basch, in *The Last Days*, bends forward slightly and mimes grasping a handle to illustrate how he pushed the tumbrrel of heaped corpses to the gate of the crematorium com-
pound at Dachau. This and other passages exemplify the documentary’s function to inscribe history through bodily movements that simultaneously reenact what was and what continues to be.

Irrupting here and there, out of a film also comprising archival and distant testimonial footage, are two dozen brief sequences depicting visits to Europe by the film’s five Hungarian subjects accompanied by their respective family members. These visits, like that of Elie Wiesel to Auschwitz with Winfrey, were made, in large part, to be documented—and I do not mean that pejoratively. For here they are now, productively staged (like all filmed interviews) to bring into being thoughts, words, actions, and encounters that otherwise might have remained unformulated, unexpressed, and unlived. And here they are now for communication to the next generation and for cinematic sustenance beyond the lifespan of Holocaust survivors and refugees. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer end their essay with the insight that “at the crossroads in Czernowitz, telling and listening became a collaborative endeavor.” For their parents Lotte and Carl Hirsch, “‘It would not have made sense to return except in this constellation.’ . . . ‘We would not have come without you’” (93). *The Last Days* and other Holocaust documentaries of return, for their parts, orchestrate a cinematic telling and listening in which it would not have made sense to return without a camera.

In the film and because of the film project, we see Renée Firestone at the Auschwitz archives leafing through a stack of index cards to find the record of her sister Klara’s incarceration and death. Obviously anticipated as a significant moment that could be documented as it happened, this sequence captures the quiet shiver of horror when Firestone reaches Klara’s card. The film project also enables Firestone to interview the Nazi Dr. Hans Münch about the medical experiments performed on Klara at Münch’s concentration camp “clinic.” “He was very evasive,” Firestone later summarizes, confirming my own impression of the interview.

Lanzmann’s explanation of his own research process would seem to apply as well to that of protagonists in documentaries of return, including this one: “If you go to Auschwitz without knowing anything about Auschwitz and the history of the camp, you will see nothing . . . In the same way, if you know without having been there, you will also not understand anything . . . *This is a film from the ground up*” (Chevrie and le Roux 38–39, emphasis mine). With all due respect for the wealth of documentation on industrialized mass murder available at the Auschwitz museum, much of which is effectively geared toward meeting the first-time visitor’s need for introduction and explanation, I take Lanzmann’s point that extraordinary knowledge is produced from this chemistry of distant or proximate learning and physical gleaning.
Moreover, a film sur place can extend to spectators the benefits or horrified shivers of “site-seeing.”

HOLOCAUST documentaries of return are in these ways very valuable cinematic interlocutors in the ongoing effort to fathom Holocaust history. But there is also a manifest tendency in quite a few of them to capitalize on the particular emotional appeal of the redemptive narrative. In The Last Days, after having experienced important discoveries with Renée Firestone, we come finally to the moment when she returns to her childhood home. She spots the house and crosses the street. With the film crew trailing, she reaches the gate and presses the handle. “It just doesn’t open . . . it doesn’t open.” She bows her head and cries. Later in the film we will observe her lighting a memorial candle at Auschwitz. For a hopeful ending, The Last Days offers up the new and successive generations: the family members of the five protagonists who accompany and witness their journeys and the adult children and grandchildren home in the United States. Bill Basch has brought his son Martin to tour Dachau. In the DVD Outtakes and Behind the Scenes Footage, he exacts a promise: “You will bring your children here and they should bring their children.”

These are moving sequences, and it is heartening, for many, to witness the return and continuation of a people all but doomed to extinction. But I am cognizant as well of the aforementioned problems posed by the redemptive narrative of return with its “dominating sense of past injustice” and disengagement from pressing, current problems and competing claims to land and property. However viscerally we may feel the pull of ancestral and childhood abodes and the grief of deportation and exile, critical human geography teaches us that neither the territory, nor the map, nor the visitor it guides is a stable entity with a tangible existence apart from assertions and contestations of belonging.

In her aptly titled Terra Infirma, Irit Rogoff charts an “unheimlich” or “unhomed geography” where rites/rights of return are not fixed with regard to national, religious, and generational features of the landscape. She advocates a shift away from a “moralizing discourse of geography and location, in which we are told . . . who has the right to be where and how it ought to be so . . . to a contingent ethics of geographical emplacement in which we might jointly puzzle out the perils of the fantasms of belonging as well as the tragedies of not belonging” (3). An art historian by training, Rogoff envisions a space where “political insights, memories, subjectivities, projections of fantasmatic desires and great long chains of sliding signifiers” can hold sway
against “concrete coercions” determined by religious and state apparati (7, 4). Contemporary works of art, she believes, may array “alternative strategies” through which we can “review our relationship with the spaces we inhabit” (frontispiece).

So, too, may documentaries of return. Watching such films critically, we may discern how the “tragedies of not belonging” are indeed intercalated with the “perils of the fantasies of belonging.” To some extent, The Last Days enables this sort of critically fruitful thinking where competing and even irreconcilable territorial claims break a path toward mutual understanding. The film is at its most compelling, I believe, when in addition to affirming the presence of situated bodies, it also physically documents what Howard Jacobson calls the “voluptuous ambition of repossessing nothing” (Jacobson 7, cited in Palmer 248).

Prior to the image of Firestone before her gate, there is a sequence involving Irene Zisblatt’s return to her hometown, now in Ukraine. She testifies that she remembers the town as “picturesque and happy.” We see a castle on a hill, a man in a horse-drawn cart, and the view from the van as Zisblatt travels along. “I’m hoping that I can find some of the people that I knew before the Holocaust and maybe that I can talk to them.” Amazingly, we do witness her reunion with an old woman, Mariska, who remembers Zisblatt’s grandparents, father, mother, and Zisblatt herself. “I was most surprised that she remembered me,” the latter reflects in voice-over, “I was really afraid that the people were going to be hostile to me. . . .” We cut to an interview with Zisblatt at night, in what is probably the van interior, a spotlight on her face providing dramatic intensity (as well as the illumination necessary to film) as she continues: “. . . that they were going to be accusing me of coming back to take something away from them.” Over an image of the countryside: “I was asked in a very nice way, am I planning to take my property and come back to live there? And I said no.” Back to the van interior: “I just want my children to know where I came from and I wanted to see my town where I grew up one more time before I die.” Cut to Zisblatt on a rural road, pointing out landmarks to her daughter.

This is information we have when we see Firestone before the closed gate and then walking up the road to a former neighbor’s walled home. There, Firestone speaks with a man who was a child during the war and his Russian wife. “Your own house; to take someone’s house. How could that be?” he sympathizes. His wife continues, evoking the atmosphere of decades of communist rule, the conflicting interests of the current situation, and the physical materiality of witnessing: “There would be a lot to tell. But you know what they say: even the walls have ears.” The sequence concludes with
Firestone’s understandable and revealing reflection about the doubleness of home: “At that moment I felt very lucky that I will have a chance to go back to the United States, to my home.”

Blocked from entry into her former home, suspended between the evidence Auschwitz coughs up and the information withheld, and reversing the direction of return, Firestone’s trajectory extends beyond any single point of arrival. Likewise, Zisblatt’s return to Polena is successful only because it is a temporary visit that does not involve the repossession of property and because its transposition into film form highlights the rigors (and weirdly fortuitous benefits) of confinement, expulsion, and exclusion. Zisblatt, like Firestone, may have lived a fuller existence unhomed from Ukraine. Here and there among the film’s multiple narratives of return, we sense the energy of critical geography: “home” is both a magnetic field that attracts us and a molten extrusion of historical and contemporary, regional and national, economic and political, ethnic, and religious frictions.

**Hiding and Seeking**

*Hiding and Seeking* (2004) is explicitly anti-redemptive in its narrative patterning. The trip and its documentation do not take place primarily to interview former neighbors who stood by while Jewish families were taken away, or to mourn and memorialize the deceased, or to commemorate the Shoah, or to celebrate the triumph of the generations. Rather, film and trip were initiated by Menachem Daum (who was raised an Orthodox Jew and remains religiously observant) with the aim to combat religious insularity and xenophobia in the thinking of his own sons and, presumably, in the thinking of some of the film’s viewers. His plan is to engage the sons and “us” in the activity of finding and recognizing the family’s Polish rescuers. As with Lanzmann’s return of the “one-time boy singer” to Chelmno, Daum’s actions also entail, therefore, a persuasion and a return. And, like *Shoah, Hiding and Seeking* is a “film from the ground up.” But in this more recent film, both the grounds for action and the situations of bodies in space have been redefined.

New York–based Menachem Daum with Oren Rudavsky is co-director of this thematically progressive, audiovisually inventive, and thereby semi-autobiographical documentary. The child of a father who survived the Holocaust, Daum has constructed an itinerary that begins with him and his wife Rifka taking leave of their aging, immigrant fathers and traveling from New York to Israel to pick up their two grown sons who live as Orthodox Jews
with their wives and children. Together, the family then travels on to Poland, where they go first to the hometown of Menachem’s father and then to the farm where Rifka’s father, Chaim Federman, along with his two brothers, survived the genocide hidden by a Polish farmer and his family at the risk of their own lives.

Prior to leaving on the trip, Daum asks for a paternal blessing. “Go in peace and return in peace,” his wheelchair-bound father pronounces in halting Yiddish, affected perhaps by the lingering results of a stroke. Then, surprising us and maybe his son as well: “I want to go with you.” “Where do you want to go?” Daum inquires. “To my home,” his father answers. “Where is your home?” “Stevchinka 7.” But Daum’s father does not make the journey, and his original home is made strange by its presentation in the film.

In the car, driving along in the Polish countryside, Rifka Daum responds to her husband’s repeated whistling and humming of the song, “I’m Going Home,” with a very definite: “You may be going home. We’re certainly not going home . . . This ain’t my home.” Her point about having been raised elsewhere is emphasized when the group is met with an absence in Daum senior’s hometown of Zduńska Wola. The houses and the synagogue that used to stand in the Jewish quarter are gone, and a convenience store among other shops occupies space near Stevchinka 7A. When Daum folds and refolds a paper prayer inscribed with family names and tucks it into the crevice between a telephone pole and its concrete base, this is too much for his younger son. “I’d like to say . . . I think this is nuts,” he asserts in direct address to the camera. “I object. “I think this is completely ridiculous. A complete waste of time. Like the film.” Indeed, he and his brother look very much out of place in their black clothing, hats, and payes among the Polish young people out on the street.

It is precisely in and through the resistance of the various family members, and in and through the visual evidence of the differences between the Jewish visitors and the presumably non-Jewish Polish residents, that the film reminds us of the area’s history of anti-Semitism and, following Rogoff, of the near-inevitability that a given town or region will be multiply inhabited (if not ethnically cleansed). In this and other ways, Hiding and Seeking brings to the fore the complicated, spatialized relationships among “the world-wide Jewish community,” “the wider Polish nation,” “the existing local inhabitants” and the returning Daums. Particular advantage is made of the motion picture’s ability simultaneously to ground and to unleash bodies and spaces from one another and, I submit, from an imagined territorial imperative where only certain people belong. Specifically, through the use of voice-over narration and editorial juxtaposition, the film establishes a productive asyn-
chronicity between seeing and hearing (image track and sound track) and a productive spatial noncontiguity (physical presence and absence).

As does his father, Daum’s father-in-law remains at home rather than making the trip to Europe. But they both return by generational proxy, and, especially in the case of the latter, Rifka Daum’s father Chaim Federman, by filmic means as well. While Federman is home in the United States, the film nevertheless enables the “return of [his] voice.” Prior to the trip, he had advised his son-in-law not to go to the farm where he had been hidden, even though Federman acknowledged that the farmer and his family had rescued him and his brothers: “He saved our lives. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.” Still, he rationalized, “they forgot already,” and he urged his son-in-law to tell the Polish family that he had died. For one thing, Federman had “promised them the world.” For another, he had good reason to be leery of return. After the war, he recalled, “When a Jew came back, they killed him.” “I don’t know what’s going on there today. Better, don’t show yourself.” But, of course, Menachem Daum and family do make the trip. Over images of the Polish countryside we hear Federman’s voice on the soundtrack: “Don’t look. Don’t stay on the street. You go by car. You stay outside. Better you shouldn’t show yourselves.” Accompanying images of Daum and one of his sons, in a field in Poland under partly cloudy skies flouting their patriarch’s advice Federman’s words are heard in haunting voice-over: “I don’t like that you should go there.”

That Chaim Federman is there, paradoxically, in absentia, and that his absent presence matters, are also conveyed through another sequence, amazing for its condensation of new and old technologies on the filmic windowpane. Pulled over to the side of the road, the Daums, their guide, and their driver peer at the map and a laptop computer open on the hood of the car. Działoszyce, the town, and then, smaller, Dziekanowice, we make out. But how to get there? Menachem Daum reaches his father-in-law back in Brooklyn on the cell phone, and, in Polish retained from childhood, Federman describes, apparently to a local of the area passing by, the landmarks by which the family (and the film crew) might navigate the narrow roads to the farmhouse. We see the Poland end of the conversation and the little silver instrument from which the voice emanates. The call exemplifies Felman’s assertion that eyewitness testimony holds an “utterly unique and irreplaceable topographical position with respect to an occurrence” (206) (Federman was once there; he and he alone among the visitors remembers the way back). At the same time, the call also exemplifies the possibility that that position may be one of distance and difference. Lanzmann is critical of knowing without going and going without knowing. This film somewhat
reflexively presents (audio)visual technologies as a means of collaborative, mediated, and, as I will elaborate below, resistant knowing and going that problematizes redemptive narration.

The next sequence is astounding, for the Daums do make it to the home of the Polish rescuers and the very spot on earth where the young Chaim Federman was given shelter, the cradle of the gathered family. The reunion happens very fast on film. First a shot through the front windshield as the car proceeds according to Federman’s long-distance directions; then a close-up of Rifka in the car with the countryside unrolling behind her; then a long-shot of a farmyard, a barking dog tied up at the tree. Suddenly the Daums have arrived and it is established that the woman on the path in front of a substantial home with a beautiful flower garden is the granddaughter of the late farmer, Stanislaw Matuszcyk. After nearly sixty years, the daughter of Chaim Federman and the granddaughter of Stanislaw Matuszcyk inhabit the same patch of ground where their forebears met, and they also inhabit the same filmic shot. As Rifka excitedly questions the woman, “Did [your grandfather] ever tell stories about that he hid three brothers?” the film cuts to the woman’s father, Wojciech Mucha (the now-elderly son-in-law of Matuszcyk), rounding the corner of the garden fence, tipping his hat to the visitors with Old World manners. With some prompting, he is able to recall at least two of the brothers’ names. “Get your grandmother,” says Mucha’s daughter to her own daughter, a young person who appears to be in her early twenties. Daum’s sons, no longer protesting the ridiculousness of their father’s “quest,” shake hands with Mucha just before the film cuts back to the fence corner to take in the arrival of Honorata Mucha, daughter of Stanislaw Matuszcyk and wife of Wojciech Mucha. Completely bent over, she cranes her neck to greet the group and then rattles off with decisive speed the names of the three brothers. She herself cooked their food, we later learn, and carried it to the barn in a bucket so as not to alert the neighbors to the hidden Jews.

The group then files up the path into the farmyard, halting where the barn once stood and where the brothers secre ted themselves in a pit covered over with hay. We see Honorata Mucha from above, her green headscarf with the flowered border bright against the grass in the yard. The bones of her body mark the passage of years; her feet retrace steps of long ago—perhaps kicking up some particle of dust that had lain on the ground these many years—while her gesturing arms conduct the family’s testimony. The Germans entered the yard, we learn through the translator. The season was late autumn or winter, so only one layer of hay remained to hide the entrance to the hole. But the family was brave, Wojciech Mucha recalls. The Jewish brothers were not found, and everybody survived. Menachem Daum's
sons, Tsvi Dovid and Akiva, read a prayer for a “place where one’s parents, forebears, torah teacher or nation as a whole were miraculously saved from imminent danger.” The dog, tied to a nearby tree, barks incessantly over the words of the prayer while Rifka Daum and her sons are moved to tears. In relation to the film’s plot, thrumming with travel and conversation, this is a privileged moment amply illustrating Yi-Fu Tuan’s profound insight: “If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (6). From undifferentiated space, post–Holocaustic Europe such as the travelers perhaps imagined before the journey, the farmyard takes shape as a known and valued place. A year later, inside the house, we pause again when Honorata Mucha smiles over the telephone as she speaks with Federman in New York. “Good health to you,” she says. “May you live to be a hundred years.”

Bodies exposed to the camera and film exposed to our eyes fix, very tangibly, the historical knowledge of a past event, miraculous or miraculously and exceptionally humane. And yet the film is also open to an alternate architectonics where knowledge circulates semi-autonomously from the physical proximity of people who “were there” at the time of the original events and place. Federman himself did not make the trip. But the filming and the film convey their lessons through the physical transportation of second- and further-generation travelers and also, significantly, through the physical absence, marked by the audio presence, of Federman.

As discussed above, Federman counseled his family not to go. He himself may have been as unwilling as he was unable to undertake the journey. This resistance informs Hiding and Seeking, such that the film may be read as countervailing the very materiality of eye-witnessing and mediated-witnessing in which it also revels. We learn from a conversation between the two families that the Polish household took in the Jewish brothers out of pity and with thoughts of future compensation. Back in New York, Chaim Federman had acknowledged, “I promised them the world, [that I can] support them, understand?” Now, the granddaughter of Wojciech and Honorata Mucha questions why the family had never heard a word from the three brothers after the war. Rifka Daum explains that her father “feels bad about it; he regrets that he didn’t do more.” “We’re here to correct that,” vows Menachem Daum. And so the Daums apply to Yad Vashem and return to Poland one year later to participate in a ceremony, included in the film, in which the Muchas are presented with the medal for the “Righteous among the Nations.” The Israeli Ambassador, himself a Polish Jewish survivor, officiates, and Tsvi Dovid gives a speech thanking and honoring the Muchas and offering a fund
for the education of their descendants. He also explains that his grandfather
“has literally become paralyzed to act upon . . . an overwhelming sense of
insurmountable debt.” Rifka’s and Menachem’s eldest granddaughter, rep-
representing the fourth generation, presents flowers to Honorata Mucha and
kisses her on the cheek.

Juxtaposed with this sequence (preceding it in the order of the film) is
Chaim Federman’s admission, with all due self-knowledge, that if the situ-
tion were reversed, if Jewish refugees had come to him for a place to hide and
he would have had to risk his life to give it, he would have refused. But why,
then, hadn’t he kept in touch with his rescuers, knowing full well what they
did for him? Actually, from a special feature on the DVD, we learn that fifty
items of correspondence between Stanislav Matuszczyk and the Federman
brothers were discovered in the Muchas’ attic a year after the film was fin-
ished. This is a correspondence that ended in 1959, that Federman apparently,
perhaps symptomatically, forgot and that Matuszczyk apparently never shared
with his daughter and son-in-law. Some of the letters allude to attempts to
purchase property for the farmer. One letter in particular is quoted by co-
director Oren Rudavsky. It is a letter from Federman to Matuszczyk that ends
with the following sentences: “How are you without the Jews? Are you better
without them?” Federman’s words betray anger, a justifiable emotion under
the circumstances, many would say. Indeed, it is possible to watch the film
and wonder whether Federman’s would-be debt wasn’t already canceled sev-
eral million times over by the Polish expropriation of property and lives.
The incessant barking where the barn once stood underlines that the Daums
are strangers. The sound bothers the nerves and threatens the audibility of
reconciliation.

Without utterly suppressing Jewish anger or Jewish difference (the let-
ters may be confined to the special features, but the bow-wow-wow is live
action), it is nevertheless the goal of the film to work them through. Near
the beginning, Menachem Daum plays for his sons a tape of an Orthodox
Jewish leader advocating separation between Jews and Gentiles and a legacy
of hatred. Jewish people should “implant in ourselves and in our children,
hatred to them,” he orates. “Tell our children what the goyim have done to
us for 1,900 years.” This is precisely the attitude the film is designed to reject.
We cannot let the religion be “hijacked by extremists,” teaches Daum. And
yet Daum includes as the penultimate sequence the response of his younger
son, Akiva, heard in voice-over, accompanying a traveling shot of the road
through the car windshield as the Daums drive away after their second visit
to the farm. “What did you learn, Akivala, from meeting these people?”
inquires Daum. “I learned there’s some very good people in the world. Some
very nice people, and a lot of not nice people. . . . That was the truth. You want to know the truth? You add a few exceptions to the rule. But the general rule of thumb was, you know, to get rid of the Jew was the best thing to do and, um, they'd probably do it again.”

Jewish anger is rarer in Holocaust narratives than are sadness and expressions of victimhood. Survivors and refugees generally take and are often ceded the moral high ground. In *Hiding and Seeking*, the situation is more complex and ongoing. The film could have ended triumphantly, with positive lessons learned from the ceremony of the “Righteous among Nations.” But Akiva’s resistance, like Federman’s, is pronounced, and the narrative maintains a purposeful lack of closure. Daum describes the trip to Poland as his “tzavoah” to his children, “a document; sort of an ethical will,” through which he has communicated the important values by which he would like them to live. “I think it’s like planting a seed,” he says, in voice-over narration as he and Rifka along with their grandchildren stroll under a canopy of trees to the edge of a lake. “It can take years and years. But that’s my hope.” Here, as in *The Last Days*, the succession of the generations is presented optimistically. But *Hiding and Seeking* takes pains to highlight the ethical complexities of religious difference by acknowledging both the humanity of others and the hatred that Jewish religious extremism can harbor. The film itself is a tzavoah, a document through which these hopes and acknowledgments are nurtured.

Menachem Daum responds to his wife’s emphatic “this ain’t my home” with the characterization of himself as a “wandering Jew.” And yet his trajectory is deliberate. As they encounter the generous past actions of the Matuszczk family and, by implication, other non-Jewish people, the Daums’ “sentiments come to be mapped as physical transformations” (Bruno 245). In bringing his religiously insular sons from Israel to Poland, Daum reverses the redemptive narrative pathway from the camps of Poland to the Jewish state. “Neither the exilic dream of return to organic connection nor the nomadic celebration of rootless liberty,” John Durham Peters writes, “offers quite the best option for living in a world of differences” (39). Agreed. This is precisely why I value the film’s presentation of travel by person and by proxy and its use of asynchronous and noncontiguous sounds and images as an innovative, critically productive way of bridging the disjunction between over-zealous assertions of belonging and commemorative rites of resigned expatriation. Through its establishment of an anti-essentializing positionality, *Hiding and Seeking* “teaches the perpetual postponement of homecoming and the necessity, in the meanwhile, of living among strange lands and peoples” (39).
Conclusion

Certain Holocaust documentaries of return tend to further fantasies of home and homeland while avoiding competing claims to physical place and cultural space. But I hope this chapter has shown as well that the Holocaust documentary of return may function as a flexible modality that increases the dimensionality of seeing, going, and being-there beyond any specific narrative trajectory; certain documentaries of return or portions thereof maximize their potential to make “more room for lived space and its movement” (Bruno 245).

Along with the personal histories of survivors and refugees that have been collected by the various Holocaust video archives around the world (and that now contribute to an enormous digital repository), we now have the filmically documented visits or situated testimonies of many “who were there.” In the form of built or unbuilt environments, places remain that returnees and their descendents can point to and say, “it is here, right here at this [train] track” (Winfrey anticipating Wiesel’s arrival) or “in front of the tree; right here” (on the Mucha farm): this is where it happened.

But, as I have sought to argue here, neither the physical presence of an actual refugee on the soil or pavement that she or he fled or was removed from, nor any proliferation of landmarks, can guarantee the fullness or accuracy of historical detail. In fact, the absence of persons and structures may be particularly telling, as in the case of the ruined synagogue in Zduńska Wola or that of Chaim Federman’s failure to write or return. We may take the very instability of the documentary of return as an invitation to read moving testimonies critically and with renewed vigor. The seed is planted in a “terra infirma.”

The main aim of this essay, then, is to recognize the radical, historiographic possibilities of the Holocaust documentary of return as a material form of testimony that nevertheless resists a deterministic view of place. By presenting the critically accessible suggestion that “every topography and every text is doubly inhabited by often irreconcilable cultural positions,” these texts help “undo the universalism that attempted to bind us all together under the aegis of the dominant” (Rogoff 110–11). However committed to physical propinquity, however engaged with the allure of past haunts—and it is so committed and engaged—the Holocaust documentary of return, as a film or video text on the move, is also beautifully cut out to mediate our experience of testimony and witnessing across the discontinuous geographical spaces and the multiply inhabited places we call home.
AUTHOR’S NOTE: I would like to express my gratitude to Susan Rubin Suleiman for recommending *Hiding and Seeking* as a film that might further my interest in documentaries of return; it did indeed. And many thanks to the editors of the volume for their expert comments on this chapter and their exceptionally generous working method that included inviting geographically dispersed contributors to meet and talk in person.

Notes

1. “I did not want to go to Poland,” Lanzmann explained. “I thought that one can talk about this from everywhere, from any place, from Paris, from Jerusalem, from New Haven . . . And I said, ‘what will I see in Poland, I will see the nothingness, I will see the absence’” (Felman 256n36, referencing Lanzmann, “Evening” 4–5). But, of course, he did make the trip and many more. “The Israelis . . . asked me if I would consider undertaking a film about the Holocaust,” recounts Lanzmann; “I said yes rather quickly, without thinking very much . . . After I started, it became impossible to stop” (Felman 250, referencing Lanzmann, “Interview” 21).

2. Here I am borrowing Richard Slotkin’s phrase from his book title because it calls to mind not only a specific place of genocide but also the mythologizing impulse through which that space is continually reimagined.

3. Elsewhere I have written about the vicissitudes and the “paradox” of traumatic memory; see works cited.

4. The film, Hirsch observes, has not been received “as a significant cinematic representation of the Holocaust” (64), and yet it is significant in this regard for revealing the inextricable connections between “the technical/formal innovations” of cinema vérité and “the memory of the Holocaust” and for revealing as well the “impossibility of presenting a snapshot of French society in 1960 without either confronting or repressing the unresolved collective memory of deportation” (64–65). *Chronique d’un été*, Hirsch asserts, “constituted a crucial moment in the development of a documentary discourse of historical trauma in Europe” (65).

5. I would add that in relation to *The Last Days* and other Holocaust documentaries of return of which I speak, Marceline’s is a different sort of return, this time from the camp rather than back to it.

6. By “state-building,” I assume Ashworth is referring to the state of Israel, and I read his article as implicitly anti-Zionist. In any case, Holocaust tourism in Eastern Europe does seem worth exploring from a critical perspective.

Works Cited

Film and Video


Print


Interview given by Lanzmann on the occasion of his visit to Yale University. Interviewers Dr. Dori Laub and Laurel Vlock. Filmed at the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, May 5, 1986.


