

**Translating Genocide:
Preventing the Erasure of Holocaust Stories**

Parker Brocker-Knapp
PLU ID: 16746152
402 123rd St S
Tacoma, WA 98444
plb@plu.edu (503) 318 8610

Abstract

By pairing Raphael Lemkin's nuanced understanding of genocide with insights from translation-based research examining Holocaust testimonies, this essay affirms two claims: that genocides have no true end dates and that translation is a powerful form of resistance to genocide. Lemkin's original formation of the term challenges us to see genocide as ongoing, intergenerational, and in need of our continued resistance to its desire to destroy a people. Through the preservation of survivor testimonies and a more deeply developed understanding of how genocide continues to wound its victims, this resistance is possible. But to fully amplify the potential exposure of these testimonies and to thus maximize their resistive power in the face of genocidal forces, the ethical and effective translation of these histories must be prioritized.

Brocker-Knapp - Lemkin Paper

Translating Genocide: Preventing the Erasure of Holocaust Stories

In the sweltering South American heat of January 2019, two professors from Pacific Lutheran University and a student research assistant arrived at a Jewish nursing home in the heart of Montevideo, Uruguay. Equipped with two digital cameras and a pair of lapel-clip microphones, the group sought to document the stories of the home's aging Jewish residents and the caregivers who look after them. With the ultimate intention of creating a digital archive of these interviews, Drs. Giovanna Urdangarain and Rona Kaufman and student researcher Riley Dolan investigated questions of identity, trauma, memory, and perseverance. Residents, some of them in their nineties, shared story after story of fleeing antisemitism, struggling to survive as the Holocaust drew on, and searching for a safer home in a new hemisphere. Their caregivers, representing a wide range of ages and backgrounds, shared insights into their relationships with the residents and their own connections to the Jewish community. By the end of the month, fifteen interviews had been successfully conducted with survivors, their loved ones, and their caregivers, forever preserving these crucial testimonies.

Three years later, in the spring of 2022, I was asked to take part in the next stage of the process. As a Spanish speaker and as a student of both Latin America and the Jewish Diaspora, my skills and education provided the necessary context for the work that the project entailed. With the majority of the footage still in its raw form, I was tasked with transcribing the content of the interviews, translating them from Spanish into English, and creating presentable and fully subtitled videos ready for publication in an online archive. As I quickly learned, this process entailed much more than the translation of a written text would. I not only decided how best to translate the spoken content of the interviewees, but also how to most effectively interpret sounds, gestures, and inflections. Mediating ethically between the interests of audience

understanding, speaker intent, and the preservation of source content, I became engulfed by the meticulous balancing act that scholars call “the essential creativity of translation.”¹ Many of the elderly interviewees shared their traumas and memories in the Spanish that they had learned as a second or third language in their youth, further complicating my ability to understand and translate. Considering the “sensitivity required when dealing with texts that are the focus for significant emotional investment,” the “vital cultural importance” of the Holocaust testimonies that I was translating added yet another layer of responsibility.²

Setting aside the practical task of translating, I also felt an odd in-betweenness in my role. As neither a Uruguayan nor a member of the Jewish community, I share no religious or national identity with the interviewees. Yet, as a bilingual Hispanic Studies and Holocaust and Genocide Studies student, I felt uniquely equipped to navigate the nuances of the translation of these testimonies and further develop my understanding of genocide at the same time. As a result, I soon learned two crucial lessons: that genocides have no true end dates and that translation is a powerful form of resistance to genocide. These realizations expanded what the concept of genocide means to me, providing a clearer vision of how genocidal forces must be and can be resisted against in creative ways.

Nearly 100 years prior to the initiation of this project, in interwar Ukraine, a Polish Jewish polyglot and legal scholar authored his first published work, a translation of a novella by the Jewish poet Bialik. Raphael Lemkin, now famously known as the creator of the term “genocide” and the key driving force behind the United Nations’ 1948 adoption of the Genocide Convention, was, at that time in 1926, attending a doctoral program in Lwów, Ukraine. Already

¹ Translating Holocaust Lives. India: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, 6.

² Translating, 4.

struggling intellectually with the inadequacies of international law in the context of mass, state-sponsored atrocities, Lemkin was “young and excited,” as his professor once said as a way to discredit Lemkin’s objections.³ In his memoir, Lemkin recounts the classroom arguments he had with his professors over issues of sovereignty, conscience, and moral order. Those who have analyzed Lemkin’s memoir, like University College London law professor Phillippe Sands, point out that Lemkin’s autobiographical writing “makes no mention [...] of his life in Lwów.”⁴ Instead, Lemkin simply focuses on recounting his life as it relates to the law. Yet, despite this seemingly unwavering focus on his education, Lemkin still chose to devote his time outside of the classroom to a project of translation. Language, both as an instrument of tremendous power and a bridge between otherwise disconnected peoples, was clearly important to Lemkin.

Though anecdotal, these elements of Lemkin’s story provide a profound context for his later work in international law. As the main proponent for a robust and globally recognized legal definition for the crime of genocide for the roughly fifteen years leading up to the UN’s ratification of the term’s definition, Lemkin fought “patiently and unselfishly” in pursuit of his goals. When the UN finally approved the convention in 1948, Lemkin’s “apparent success” was undercut by his belief that a more comprehensive definition was necessary. The UN’s definition, “borrowing from Lemkin” and “largely at Lemkin’s instigation,” focuses on acts “committed with intent to destroy” a people through killing, mental or bodily harm, poor conditions of life, the prevention of births, or the forcible transfer of children.⁵

³ Sands, Philippe. *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity*. This paperback edition first published in 2017. London: W&N, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017, 196.

⁴ Sands, 195.

⁵ Cox, John M. *To Kill a People: Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 4-6.

Although crucial to our modern understanding of genocide, these elements characterize the broader crime as the destruction of a people only through the killing or harming of the individual human beings that comprise it. Lemkin, as he explains in his 1944 book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, viewed genocide in much broader terms. “[T]he actions involved [in genocide] are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group,” he writes. According to Lemkin’s definition, genocide is “a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups.” “[S]uch a plan,” he adds, aims to disintegrate “culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence” of its targets.⁶ These elements, the abstract and intangible concepts that give meaning to a group’s shared identity, stretch far beyond the killing of individuals that the UN definition fixates on. Following Lemkin’s logic, if genocide intends on destroying a people by targeting what binds them together and not just by killing en masse, then the end of a genocide cannot only be measured by when the final bullet is shot. Lemkin’s original formation of the term inspires us to rethink an underdeveloped understanding of genocide, reach beyond its legal limitations, and see that its legacy continues to thrive in dangerous ways.

As two of the fifteen interviewees in the digital archive, mother and daughter Irene Rzadzinksa and Eva Nathan Rzadzinksa epitomize this fundamental truth of ongoing genocide. As a teenager in Warsaw, Poland during the rise of the Nazi regime, Irene felt premonitions of the coming danger in the leadup to the German invasion. She communicated her fears to her family, who responded by calling her crazy and unhealthy. After insisting that she needed to escape to the east, her mother decided to consult the local rabbi. As Irene tells it, “The rabbi said to my mom: ‘We live in insecure times. If her desire is so strong, let her go.’ And they let me go.

⁶ Lemkin, Raphael, and Samantha Power. *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*. Clark, N.J: Lawbook Exchange, 2005, 79.

And how great. [...] The rabbi was indeed wise.”⁷ As a matter of pure instinct, as her daughter Eva puts it, Irene fled from Warsaw one day before the Germans’ arrival to the city, heading east toward Russia. Having fled alone, Irene never again saw her family. Irene’s account of her journey then skips ahead without explanation, but she was likely captured by the Russians sometime before she was taken to Siberia as a “hostage,” spending four years in a forced labor camp in the brutal cold.⁸

After her time in Siberia, Irene was then taken throughout central Asia with a group of fellow orphans. Irene reveals little about the six-year-long journey through India, Kazakhstan, and Afghanistan, but does recount a specific story of being given a shred of raw meat from a vendor in Afghanistan and falling victim to a “spoiled stomach” as a result.⁹ Eventually, knowing she had an uncle living in Uruguay, Irene made her way to England where she boarded a ship destined for Montevideo. With some luck and the generosity of a stranger, Irene was able to pay the six-hundred-dollar fare and disembark at the city. There, Irene was hired for her linguistic skills by British Airways, met her husband, had two children, one of them Eva, and in her latter years, moved into the Jewish nursing home where she was interviewed for the PLU research project.

What is most striking about Irene’s story is the continued impact of the traumas endured 60 to 70 years prior on her mind and body, especially those relating to food. When reflecting on the roughly ten-year period that led her away from Poland and eventually to Uruguay, Irene consistently points to her experiences with food with specificity, as if burned into her memory

⁷ Rzadzinksa, Irene. 2019. “Irene Rzadzinksa - Hogar Israelita” Transcript of interview conducted at Hogar Israelita, Montevideo, Uruguay, January 2019. <https://www.plu.edu/hgst/wp-content/uploads/sites/63/2023/02/ireneengtranscript.docx-2.pdf>, 31.

⁸ Rzadzinksa, 4.

⁹ Rzadzinksa, 7.

more so than others. Most notably, Irene highlights the “spoiled stomach” she received while eating the shred of raw meat under the shade of a tree in Afghanistan as well as the raw onion that helped her “survive better than the others” in her group in Siberia. Accordingly, when asked what others can learn from her experiences as a Holocaust survivor, she jokingly replies “Do not eat raw meat, of course.”¹⁰

This emphasis on food and, more precisely, its scarcity and rottenness, can be understood more clearly when Irene’s testimony is paired with her daughter’s. In a separate interview without Irene present, Eva recounts the difficulties of growing up with a mother that never spoke about her life before immigrating. “It was always implicit,” she says, referring to the topic of the Holocaust. “[S]he was very strict as I told you with the food, you always had to save, you had to save--you couldn't eat what you wanted,” she recounts. “You had to save for tomorrow in case there wasn't any.”¹¹ Eva later confirms that her mother’s attitude toward eating sparked Eva’s “conflicted relationship with food,” even adding that she once went to a clinic that helped with issues of anorexia and bulimia.¹²

What is evident from the testimony of both women is that genocidal trauma bleeds beyond the generation that endured the original suffering. Even though Eva was born in South America years after the Nazi regime had already collapsed, her mother’s experiences with food insecurity during the Holocaust affected Eva in a deeply unhealthy way. The internal scars that Irene’s struggle to survive created within her were transferred to her daughter through what some children of Holocaust survivors call “that most private and potent of family languages—the

¹⁰ Rzadzinksa, 29

¹¹ Nathan Rzadzinksa, Eva. 2019. “Eva Nathan Rzadzinksa - Hogar Israelita” Transcript of interview conducted at Hogar Israelita, Montevideo, Uruguay, January 2019. <https://www.plu.edu/hgst/wp-content/uploads/sites/63/2023/02/evaengtranscript-2.pdf>, 2.

¹² Nathan, 7.

language of the body.”¹³ The eventual effects of these scars on the mental and physical health of the next generation serve as disheartening examples of a continued generational suffering. Literary scholar Ernst van Alphen confirms this sentiment, writing that the second or later generations, what he terms “the generations after,” “often suffer from clinical symptoms that can or should be understood in terms of their parents’ Holocaust trauma.”¹⁴ If, as Lemkin tells us, the intention of the perpetrators of genocide is to harm its victims both physically and mentally, destroying a people in every conceivable way, Eva, and the children of Holocaust survivors at large, are undoubtedly victims as well.

It is important to note that while Irene and Eva both endure the impacts of the same genocide, the traumas they live with are neither the same nor are they even comparable. In the same way that genocide continues past the death of its perpetrators or the signing of an armistice, the traumas of genocide shift and adjust as they spread to “the generations after.” These traumas become embedded, hiding in familial relationships and traumatic triggers, and decaying one from within. Consequently, unlike a gunshot or a billowing smokestack, these secondary stages of genocide are much harder to see or identify. In his investigation of second-generation testimonies, van Alphen cites various literary works that speak to this ambiguous quality of intergenerational trauma. One of the works, a 1979 book written by the daughter of Holocaust survivors, states:

Like most survivors, neither [parent] imagined how, over the years, I had stored their remarks, their glances, their silences inside me, how I had deposited them in my iron box like pennies in a piggy bank. They were unconscious of how much a child gleans from

¹³ van Alphen, Ernst. “Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory.” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 473–88. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-015>, 484.

¹⁴ van Alphen, 475.

the absence of explanation as much as from words, of how much I learned from the old photographs hanging on our apartment walls or secreted away in the old yellow envelope below my father's desk.

Similar to how Eva calls the topic of the Holocaust "implicit," the author describes her parents' approach to communication as "indirect, as consisting of silences and obliquities."¹⁵ This strategy of silence, utilized by the author's parents and Irene alike, aims to suppress the memories that elicit feelings of pain and fear, hoping to dispose of them for good. But, as we see in the case of Eva and Irene, histories left "implicit" can perpetuate the very traumas they contain. Moreover, just as the famous aphorism tells us, without exploring the horrors of what occurred, we are doomed to repeat them. If genocide is ongoing, if it now thrives discreetly within the traumas of its victims, our resistance to it must work to expose its continuing impact and weaken its hold on those it wounds. Stories must be told, traumas understood, and histories preserved. As Elie Wiesel writes in the foreword to his masterpiece *Night*, "in the end, it is all about memory, its sources and its magnitude, and of course its consequences."¹⁶ The preservation of this memory, and therefore the sharing of stories, is, indeed, an act of resistance to genocide.

In the case of the Holocaust, this task of storytelling becomes complicated by the diasporic effect of its events. In the wake of the Holocaust, European Jews fled to wherever they were welcomed, often linguistically assimilating to their new homelands. Now, over seventy years later, as Holocaust survivors are reaching the end of their lives, many are willing to share their histories. But, these stories and testimonials, although well-documented by committed

¹⁵ van Alphen, 477.

¹⁶ Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012, 4.

scholars, are bound by the language in which they are told, limiting their potential exposure and impact. If the goal of this documentation is to resist the ongoing cruelty of genocide by rejecting the erasure of a people's history, that resistance is strengthened by a wider accessibility to these stories. Translation can unlock this wider accessibility.

Though important in this way, translation is not straightforward. In her interview, Irene, clearly gifted linguistically, often swapped between English and Spanish in the middle of her responses to questions, even occasionally using words from other unknown languages. In the responses where she did stick to Spanish, much of it came through as mumbling under her breath or as interrupted or unfinished thoughts. Sitting behind Irene, Eva occasionally shakes her head to silently negate her mother's claims or misremembering, leaving listeners unsure of which accounts to trust. Many of the physical indicators complicate Irene's testimony as well. Despite the 90-plus degree heat on the day of the interview, Irene remained wrapped in a shawl throughout its duration to protect herself from the brutal Siberian cold that she still feels. Toward the end of the interview, Irene mentions a burning in her eyes that she blames on her poor eyesight and the strength of the overhead lights. Soon after, she ends the interview by telling her daughter dejectedly, "I'm so tired."¹⁷

Unsurprisingly, this confluence of factors greatly complicates the task of translation. The full sentences of a written text are replaced here with the mumbling of colloquialisms and the assumption that what goes unsaid is already understood. Simply translating the words that are spoken would leave the English-speaking viewer equally as lost as if they had been in the room in the first place. But, when the conversation's exchange is dutifully and ethically reconstructed through subtitles and transcripts, it can provide an incredible insight into the lingering effects of

¹⁷ Rzadzinksa, 37.

the Holocaust on its victims. Understanding how Irene says what she says and all that is insinuated through her “silences and obliquities” are crucial steps in unlocking the power her story holds. If effective translation allows viewers from distinct linguistic backgrounds to more deeply comprehend the depth of Irene’s struggle and perseverance, the implicitness and discreteness of genocidal traumas can be washed away. The translation of these testimonials thus functions as an effective amplification of their resistive power, for translation gives a voice to stories otherwise silenced by a language barrier. In this way, the ability of translation to unlock these histories works to preserve the collective memory of a people, reaffirming their shared identity and resisting the enduring impact of the genocidal forces that act upon them.

As Raphael Lemkin taught, genocide is more than just the physical murder of individuals. It is the killing of a people, what they are, who they are, and the collective voices and memory that give their shared identity meaning. Genocide does not stop when armies surrender or concentration camps are liberated, nor is it contained in the generation that endured the original attack. Genocide cuts deeply, leaves agonizing scars, and can continue to wound generations that follow. If genocide is ongoing, then so must our resistance to it be ongoing. If genocide desires to fully erase a people and their shared identity, our work must be to preserve their collective memory, giving voice beyond linguistic boundaries to those inspired to tell their stories.

Works Cited

- Cox, John M. *To Kill a People: Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017
- Lemkin, Raphael, and Samantha Power. *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*. Clark, N.J: Lawbook Exchange, 2005
- Nathan Rzdzinksa, Eva. 2019. "Eva Nathan Rzdzinksa - Hogar Israelita" Transcript of interview conducted at Hogar Israelita, Montevideo, Uruguay, January 2019.
<https://www.plu.edu/hgst/wp-content/uploads/sites/63/2023/02/evaengtranscript-2.pdf>
- Rzdzinksa, Irene. 2019. "Irene Rzdzinksa - Hogar Israelita" Transcript of interview conducted at Hogar Israelita, Montevideo, Uruguay, January 2019.
<https://www.plu.edu/hgst/wp-content/uploads/sites/63/2023/02/ireneengtranscript.docx-2.pdf>
- Sands, Philippe. *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity*. This paperback edition first published in 2017. London: W&N, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017.
- Translating Holocaust Lives. India: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
- van Alphen, Ernst. "Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 473–88. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-015>
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012,