

To Pass, To Last, To Cast Aside:

The Testimonies of Two
Auschwitz-Birkenau
Sonderkommando Survivors:
The Gabbai Brothers

Sarah Gregory
Honours,
Macquarie University

This article focuses on two Jewish *Sonderkommando* members from the Nazi death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau and examines how they have constructed their written and oral testimonies after the Holocaust.¹ Prisoner functionaries such as the *Sonderkommando* were prisoners used by the Nazis to control the everyday functioning of the labour and death camps. In return, they received ‘privileges,’ such as more food, for their cooperation. Because of this cooperation, many non-privileged prisoners viewed these prisoner functionaries as Nazi collaborators, particularly when recounting their own experiences. This made many prisoner functionaries self-impose a degree of silence. The *Sonderkommando*, for example, remained largely silent after their liberation from Allied forces because of fear of judgement, retribution attacks, and misunderstandings of their position.

The Nazis used the *Sonderkommando* as forced labourers to facilitate the extermination process of the so-called ‘Jewish question.’ The term ‘Jewish question’ broadly refers to the debate regarding the treatment and status of Jewish people.² As Nazi ideology considered Jews racially inferior, the answers to the ‘Jewish question,’ according to Nazi policy makers, was to first segregate and then ultimately eliminate Jewish people from Europe. This decision to eliminate Jewish people from Europe took form in the systematic mass-murder policy known as the ‘Final Solution.’³ To carry out this mass extermination process, *Sonderkommando* members ensured the fast-paced undressing phase of prisoners prior to their gassing; removed bodies from the gas chambers and relocated them to the furnace room or large outdoor pits for cremation; removed valuable items, hair and

1 The term *Sonderkommando* translates into German as ‘special unit’ or ‘special squad’. This article uses the term to refer to the Jewish prisoners used throughout Nazi extermination camps to carry out the gas chamber and crematoria work. Yad Vashem, ‘Sonderkommando’, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/microsoft%20word%20-%206031.pdf, accessed 8 July 2013.

2 For an in-depth analysis of the “Jewish question” and its history, see Alex Bein, *The Jewish Question: Biography of a World Problem*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1990).

3 ‘Nazi Ideology’ in *Nazi Ideology and the Holocaust*, ed. William F. Meinecke, (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2007), 11-22.

gold teeth; and disposed of the human ashes from the crematoriums.⁴ In return for this work, *Sonderkommando* members received greater quantities of food, better living arrangements, and more leisure time.

This article compares two former *Sonderkommando* testimonies created in both public and academic mediums. These former *Sonderkommando* members are the Gabbai brothers, Ya'akov and Dario.⁵ Furthermore, this paper draws on Holocaust survivor Primo Levi's argument that the *Sonderkommando* dwelt within a 'grey zone' of moral ambiguity and complexity.⁶ Yet rather than taking Levi's position that readers should suspend judgement of these men because of their 'grey zone,' this essay maintains that audiences can and should make informed judgements of these functionaries based on a critical and careful inquiry of their individual testimonies and actions through a narrative inquiry. Doing so will contribute in ensuring that readers do not universalise the actions of this and other prisoner groups. To compare these brothers' testimonies, this paper analyses their influences, motivations, and the methods they employed to emotionally, and psychologically, cope with their camp and post war experiences as expressed in their testimonies.

Ya'akov and Dario were one of few sets of brothers to survive the *Sonderkommando* unit at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Yet both of their testimonies take remarkably different forms. Ya'akov's testimony is included in historian Gideon Greif's noteworthy *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz*.⁷ In this work, Greif interviewed Ya'akov in Hebrew in the 1980s, transcribed the interview into text, and oversaw its translation. Dario's testimony, on the other hand, takes the form of a videotaped interview undertaken in 1996 in the English language by the University of Southern California's Shoah Foundation Institute, who subsequently uploaded the testimony onto their free online archive titled 'The Visual History Archive'.⁸ By first outlining the Nazi occupation of Greece, where the Gabbai family originated, this article will follow through with two comparative analyses of Ya'akov and Dario's testimonies. These analyses will show how these two brothers have understood and constructed their similar experiences in vastly different ways.

German Occupation of Greece

German forces occupied Greece in April 1941 after assisting Italy in defeating Greece in the Greco-Italian War. Nazi powers divided Greece into three independent sections. Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria controlled one section each.⁹ Ya'akov and Dario Gabbai lived in the German occupied zone of Salonika. Salonika had the largest Jewish community in Greece, with a population of fifty six thousand

4 Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005), 1-86.

5 This essay uses the American spelling of Gabbai, rather than the translated spelling 'Gabai' offered in Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*; Ya'akov is pronounced as 'Jacob'. Dario also calls Ya'akov 'Jack' in his testimony.

6 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, (London: Penguin, 1988), 27

7 Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*.

8 Ya'akov Gabbai, "I'll Get Out of Here!" in Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 181-214; Dario Gabbai, Interview 142, Visual History Archive, (USC Shoah Foundation Institute, 2011), <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/>.

9 Umberto Gentiloni, 'Italy in Greece: A Short History of a Major Failure' in *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz*, ed. Shlomo Venezia and Jean Mouttapa, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 192-193; Edward S. Forster, *A Short History of Modern Greece, 1821-1956*, (London: Methuen, 1958), 215-216.

on the eve of the Holocaust.¹⁰ According to Dario, the first year of occupation was not bad.¹¹ After the Wannsee Conference in 1942, however, where Nazi leaders formally decided on the implementation of the ‘Final Solution’, the Nazis began to target Greek Jews.¹² They did this by imposing humiliation, dispossession, identification, and torment through anti-Jewish laws and violence. In February 1943, for example, the Germans forced the Jews of Salonika into two ghettos, on the eastern and western side respectively. Between March and August, the Germans deported more than forty-five thousand Jews from Salonika to Auschwitz-Birkenau, telling them that they were to arrive in Krakow and that the Jews in Poland would be there to welcome them and see to their needs.¹³ The Germans deceived the Greek Jews to gain their cooperation, as the overwhelming majority of Polish Jews were by 1943 already victims of the Final Solution.

The Gabbai family escaped this fate. According to Ya’akov, he and his family were among ‘that group of privileged citizens who held Italian and Spanish citizenship,’ and who had moved to Athens in July 1943 to get away from the Germans to come under Italian governance.¹⁴ The family’s foreign citizenship prevented their deportation to concentration and extermination camps earlier in the occupation period. During the first two years of Nazi occupation, the Nazis did not deport Jews who held Italian citizenship.¹⁵ The prime reason for this, according to historian Peter Longerich, is that when Nazi powers first asked for consent from the Italian government to deport Jews, in hope for cooperation, the Italian Foreign Ministry denied the request.¹⁶ The reason, according to Longerich, was that the Italian Foreign Ministry believed the Jews held an important economic role that contributed to the Italian national interest.¹⁷ Yet when Italy surrendered to Allied powers, the Nazis targeted all Jews in Greece regardless of their citizenship.

Italy surrendered in September 1943. Until then, the Italians treated the Jews in the Italian occupation zone fairly and humanely, taking in many Jewish refugees from other areas of Greece and offering the Jews safety and resettlement.¹⁸ According to figures provided by one of the leading Holocaust museums, Yad Vashem, the pre-war Jewish population of Athens was three and a half thousand which rose to eight to ten thousand during Italian occupation.¹⁹ The Italian powers resisted Nazi orders that called for the deportation of Jews to labour and extermination camps.²⁰ After Italy’s surrender, however, German forces assumed control of Greece. In doing so, the Nazis implemented the full range of anti-Jewish laws across the newly occupied territories. In March 1944, the Germans began the deportation of Jews living in Athens and other newly occupied

10 Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 363, note 5.

11 Gabbai, Interview 142, Tape 1, min 26:00ff.

12 According to Naomi E. Pasachoff and Robert J. Littman, the ‘Final Solution’ of systematically murdering Jewish and other people was already underway through means such as mobile gassing vehicles in Chelmno and through the construction of gas chambers in concentration camps. The Wannsee Conference acted as a symbol for where the ‘Final Solution’ was ‘articulated and bureaucratically confirmed,’ to ensure the ‘efficiency of a State enterprise.’ Naomi E. Pasachoff, and Robert J. Littman, *A Concise History Of The Jewish People*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 282-284.

13 Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 363, note 6.

14 Y Gabbai, “I’ll Get Out of Here!” 183.

15 Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 364.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 363, note 2.

19 Yad Vashem, ‘The Righteous among the Nations: Greece,’ http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/stories/historical_background/greece.asp, accessed 11 August 2012.

20 Yashem, ‘Greece’.

territories to extermination camps in Poland. Among those deported were the Gabbai brothers and their families.²¹

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, the Nazis selected Ya'akov and Dario for the right group and their parents to the left group. The right and left group respectively signified those the Nazis chose as workers and those they chose to murder immediately. After one month's quarantine, Nazi officials sent Ya'akov, Dario, and other Greek Jews, to work in the *Sonderkommando* block.

Ya'akov Gabbai

Ya'akov Gabbai was born on 26 July 1912 and died in 1994. Greif conducted his series of interviews with Ya'akov in the late 1980s, which allowed Ya'akov to share his life experiences and time as a *Sonderkommando*. Greif's aim in writing about and collecting interviews with *Sonderkommando* survivors was to demonstrate, to an academic and general audience alike, that the *Sonderkommando* have been misjudged and that the general information and consensus about them and their role in the death camps was ill informed.

Ya'akov lived in a post-war Israeli political and social environment that was not sympathetic to *Sonderkommando* and their roles in the death camps. Public audiences viewed *Sonderkommando* suspiciously for a number of years after the war, both because of misinformation and judgement. In Israel, the Nazi Collaborators Act was broad enough to include *Sonderkommando* survivors as collaborators, and is an example of how such misunderstanding could result in serious political and personal consequences for former *Sonderkommando*.²²

One way in which Ya'akov was able to stay clear of this type of persecution was by joining a moshav when he, his wife, and their young daughter settled in Israel in 1949. As some Jewish survivors at the time viewed *Sonderkommando* members as collaborators, a moshav, which is a collective agricultural community of individual farms in Israel away from large cities, was ideal. *Sonderkommando* survivor Abraham Dragon, for example, remarked in his interview with Gideon Greif that while vacationing in Tiberias he heard a women survivor from Auschwitz tell people that '[t]he Jewish *Sonderkommando* prisoners were the murderers and ought to be punished. They were almost as cruel as the Germans.'²³ In a remote setting such as a moshav, Ya'akov could avoid such judgements and retribution attacks from other Jews.

Due to the rise of scholarly attention, particularly by Yad Vashem, and *Sonderkommando* testimonies such as Filip Müller's that had reached Israel, perceptions of the *Sonderkommando* as voluntary collaborators started to break down as early as the 1960s. Rising interest and empathy with their roles in the death camps made many *Sonderkommando* comfortable enough to agree to interviews with historians such as Ber Mark. Moreover, the partnership between the State of Israel and Yad Vashem to document all aspects of the Holocaust eased the fear of persecution and judgement, particularly as Israel persecuted no *Sonderkommando* under the Nazi Collaborators Act.

21 Gentiloni, 'Italy in Greece: A Short History of a Major Failure,' 195; Y Gabbai, "I'll Get Out of Here!" 184.

22 Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law,' http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1950_1959/Nazis%20and%20Nazi%20Collaborators%20-Punishment-%20Law-%20571.

23 Abraham Dragon, 'Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: "Together - in Despair and in Hope"' in Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 180.

Ya'akov's role in the *Sonderkommando* was as a 'Stoker'. This group of *Sonderkommando* placed the gassed bodies onto a stretcher and loaded them into the furnace with a pitchfork. Ya'akov remarks that for the four minutes it took to load the bodies onto the stretcher and then into the furnace, he had a half an hour break because of the time it took for the bodies to burn.²⁴ He also worked in the bunker pits during the large transports, such as those from Hungary, which he notes was very hard and tiring work without any breaks.²⁵ Ya'akov informed Greif that he could not stand the work, not because of emotional or psychological effects, but because of its physical demand with the Germans constantly watching.²⁶ Because of this, Ya'akov spoke to the Jewish *Kapos* Kaminski and Lemke to move him from the bunkers back to the crematorium. Four days later, Ya'akov returned to Crematorium II and stayed there with his brother Dario.²⁷

The beginning, middle and end narrative structure that Greif gives the interview suggests that Ya'akov has come to some form of 'closure', or acceptance of his experiences during the Holocaust. This is not the case for many Holocaust survivors. Historian Ravit Reichman, for example, has noted the importance of readers not assigning a sense of closure to events that continue to haunt victims.²⁸ Reichman's argument relates to all victims, regardless of whether they have given testimony or not. Yet Ya'akov concluded his interview with Greif stating,

Now as I sit here and tell you the whole thing, I ask myself, 'How can a human being put up with such a thing? How can he endure?' Well, man is stronger than iron. *C'est la vie, mon cher ami* - to pass, to last, to cast aside.²⁹

This 'to pass, to last, to cast aside' mentality is noteworthy because it is a rhetorical triplet, suggesting that Ya'akov did not think of it immediately and that he has purposely constructed his testimony defensively prior to his interview with Greif. Ya'akov argued that he had come to an understanding about his camp experiences. His testimony, however, suggests otherwise.

Instead of having 'closure', Ya'akov appears defiant and defensive in his responses to Greif's questions. This indicates that Ya'akov's camp experiences continually affected him by him having to continually justify himself in the post-war period, as he continually reinforced that he was not to blame. Holocaust survivor and post-war writer Primo Levi stresses a crucial motive behind the use of Jewish *Sonderkommando* by the Nazis. 'Behind the pragmatic aspect (to economize on able men, to impose on others the most atrocious task),' according to Levi, 'other moral subtle aspects can be perceived. This institution', Levi writes, 'represented an attempt to shift onto others – specifically, the victims – the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence.'³⁰ Ya'akov defensively argued that he is not ashamed to tell his story and that his conscience is clear, stating that it was 'the Germans who should be ashamed, not me. It hurts, but I'm not ashamed.'³¹

24 Y Gabbai, "I'll Get Out of Here!" 187.

25 Ibid, 187-188.

26 Ibid, 188.

27 Ibid, 188-189.

28 Ravit Reichman, 'The Myth of Old Forms: On the Unknowable and the Representation' in *Theoretical Interpretations of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 37.

29 Y Gabbai, "I'll Get Out of Here!" 214.

30 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 53.

31 Y Gabbai, "I'll Get Out of Here!" 213.

Moreover, this 'to pass, to last, to cast aside' mentality is central to how Ya'akov approached his camp experiences. This mentality, Ya'akov believed, allowed him and others to survive work in the gas chambers and crematoriums by turning off their mind, becoming robots, and 'getting used to everything.'³² According to Ya'akov, it did not take long before the *Sonderkommando* had gone beyond a 'robotic' state to become animals. As Ya'akov remarked 'we were animals. We didn't have emotions. Sometimes we doubted whether we were still human.'³³ This understanding of the *Sonderkommando* mentality, amplified by the analogies made to robots and animals for the audience's imagination and empathy, provides a context to read and comprehend Ya'akov's testimony.

This context also helps readers understand Ya'akov's experience when he, on nightshift, sat next to a dead body without it affecting his emotions. Ya'akov stated, 'Sometimes as we rested at night, I'd put my hand on a body and it wouldn't bother me anymore.'³⁴ Psychologist Johannes Lang argues that dehumanization 'involves a shift from participation to emotional detachment.'³⁵ By describing himself with non-human qualities, such as having no emotion, and considering himself more animal than human, Ya'akov has emotionally detached himself from the gassed victims. In doing so, the Nazis aim to dehumanise their victims was, in light of Lang's definition and Ya'akov's testimony, achieved in *Sonderkommando* members such as Ya'akov. This detachment caused by Ya'akov's 'animal-like' mentality, and the protection his 'to pass, to last, to cast aside' attitude provided, are reasons why Ya'akov did not dream about Auschwitz. When asked by Greif if he reflected about what happened to him in Auschwitz and if he dreamed about his experiences Ya'akov stated, 'No, sometimes I'm reminded of it but I don't dream. I've never dreamed about it. The past is past. I live in the present.'³⁶

Yet Ya'akov continually referred to the past as shown by his defiant and defensive construction of his testimony and his constant need to tell about his experiences to his family. Ya'akov noted that telling his story caused him great pain every time, that it was hard to tell, and that it was hard to describe and bring into words what he experienced and saw.³⁷ Yet when asked whether he has told his daughter his story, he asserted, 'Of course. My grandchildren too... I've always told my children everything, from the time they were small.'³⁸ Ya'akov's daughter tells Greif that her father had told her everything that happened to him, leaving nothing out, and that she had learnt about Auschwitz and the atrocities that the Nazis performed as a young girl.³⁹ Additionally, when the perceptions of *Sonderkommando* as collaborators broke down, and he felt comfortable telling his experiences in public, Ya'akov spoke with numerous children and adults at schools on Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Day, telling them everything, and continuing to do so when he worked at the Civil Guard. Ya'akov's constant telling of his testimony to different audiences highlights his need

32 Ibid, 205.

33 Ibid, 206.

34 Ibid.

35 Johannes Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization: Intersubjective Dimensions of Violence in the Nazi Concentration and Death Camps,' *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (2010), 256.

36 Y Gabbai, "I'll Get Out of Here!" 213.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid, 181-182.

to justify himself, and his survival, by reinforcing that the Nazis are to blame for the loss of Jewish communities across Europe and not the *Sonderkommando* workers.

Despite Ya'akov believing that he had a 'to pass, to last, to cast aside' mentality and approach to his Holocaust experiences, his constant re-telling of his story, particularly in its defiant and defensive rhetoric, suggests that he had not altogether 'cast aside' his camp experiences. Rather, readers may consider his testimony and actions after the war as 'acting out' defensively, as he continually asserted that he was not a collaborator.⁴⁰ According to literary theorist and historian Dominick LaCapra, who himself draws from Holocaust survivor and historian Saul Friedlander, 'acting out' trauma means the constant reliving of events, such as through nightmares or repression.⁴¹ This acting out, LaCapra suggests, limits the process of 'working through' that would allow for a level of control over emotions and for the survivor to accept their experiences and the actions taken during their traumatic experiences.⁴²

Nevertheless, the belief that his 'robotic' mentality would help him survive his horrific experiences ultimately allowed Ya'akov to maintain control of his emotions and psyche under the severe and traumatic circumstances of the *Sonderkommando* during the Holocaust.⁴³ His belief that he had this 'to pass, to last, to cast aside' attitude had the same impact on his post-war emotions and psyche, allowing him to believe that he had come to some form of closure.

Dario Gabbai

Dario Gabbai was born 2 September 1922 and lives in Los Angeles, California. On 7 November 1996, Carol Stulberg, a volunteer from the University of Southern California's Shoah Foundation Institute, interviewed Dario. Stulberg is the daughter of two Auschwitz survivors who, like Dario, moved to America after liberation.⁴⁴ Dario's testimony takes the form of a video testimony. Unlike transcribed oral and written testimonies, video testimony allows viewers to take note of the way the survivor speaks, their facial expressions and their body language. Literary theorist and historian James Young suggests that the content in Holocaust video testimonies is 'a combination of the survivor's story, the telling of the story, and the audio-visual taping of testimony.'⁴⁵ The taping of former *Sonderkommando* Morris Venezia, for example, shows his raised voice and outburst of anger in regards to the Nazis stealing Jewish property, as well as his emotional response when asked about his mother.⁴⁶ Dario's interview, on the other hand, consistently reflects his sensitive nature and his feelings of guilt.⁴⁷

40 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 54.

41 Ibid, 54, see also: Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 117ff.

42 Ibid, 54.

43 Y Gabbai, "I'll Get Out of Here!" 206.

44 Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, '2009 Summer Tour of Poland Participant Bios,' <http://www.taubephilanthropies.org/files/assets/pdf/Smr09TourBios.pdf>, accessed 15 August 2012, 7.

45 James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 158.

46 Morris Venezia, Interview 20504, VHA, Tape 4, min 27:45ff; Tape 3, min 14:00ff.

47 Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth, *Grey Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), 392; D Gabbai, Interview 142.

Dario's testimony chronologically details his experiences. Of his experiences, Dario and the interviewer pay close attention to his time in the *Sonderkommando* unit. Dario was 22 when the Nazis selected him for work in the *Sonderkommando*. Based in Crematorium II, Dario's role was to bring the gassed bodies from the elevator and place them in groups of four in front of the oven doors, ready for workers like Ya'akov who would then place the bodies onto a stretcher and into the ovens. This job, according to Ya'akov, was much easier 'because [Dario] didn't have to pick up the bodies. He dragged them by the hands.'⁴⁸

The role of the *Sonderkommando* had a profound traumatic effect on Dario, particularly in the post-war period. Dario noted in his interview that the first ten years were particularly hard, with nightmares of the gas chambers and crematoria every week.⁴⁹ Indeed even Ya'akov remarked that Dario did not 'want to tell, to hear, or remember a thing.'⁵⁰ Dario noted in his interview that the problem with the *Sonderkommando* was not food or clothes, but 'the inside of your soul.'⁵¹ He expressed the same concerns about his soul in the BBC documentary, *Auschwitz: The Final Witness*, in 2000 and again in a 2001 interview with the Los Angeles Jewish Journal.⁵² In these, Dario told how he still suffered from guilt and shame that he had not done more to resist, and that he felt as though as should have died with his fellow Jews.⁵³

Dario's construction of his testimony also highlights influences other than his guilt and shame. Henry Greenspan has commented that Holocaust survivor testimony is a 'divided discourse.'⁵⁴ On one side, Greenspan argues, is the rhetoric of post-traumatic stress and survivor guilt and shame; while on the other side the Jewish religion tells to 'bear witness.'⁵⁵ This divided discourse is noticeable in Dario's testimony in three primary ways. First, like Ya'akov, by his robot-like actions. Second, his constant references to his desire to live and survive. Third, is Dario's rediscovered need and desire to tell contemporary audiences of what happened to Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau after having been quiet for so long due to fear.

Dario and Ya'akov were able to help each other during their time in the *Sonderkommando*. Like Ya'akov, Dario used a robot-like mentality in order to cope psychologically and emotionally with the murder of their family and fellow Jews, with the knowledge that soon the Nazis would kill them because they were aware of the 'Final Solution'. Dario stated in his interview that, 'I said to myself: How can somebody be able to survive in such an environment?'⁵⁶ He proceeded to recount how, when he went to cut hair from a victim's head, he put his foot on their stomach and due to the pressure of his weight, the body let out gas making a gasping sound, scaring Dario so much so

48 Y Gabbai, "I'll Get Out of Here!" 189.

49 D Gabbai, Interview 142, Tape 4, min 23:10ff.

50 Y Gabbai, "I'll Get Out of Here!" 214.

51 D Gabbai, Interview 142, Tape 3, min 2:40ff.

52 Dominic Sutherland, Martina Balazova and Detlef Siebert, *Auschwitz: The Final Solution*, (BBC, 2000); Naomi Pfefferman, 'Job of Infinite Horrors,' *Jewish Journal*, 19 April 2001, http://www.jewishjournal.com/community/article/job_of_infinite_horror_20010420/.

53 Ibid.

54 Henry Greenspan, 'Imagining Survivors: Testimony and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness' in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, ed. Hilene Flanzbaum, (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 59.

55 Ibid.

56 D Gabbai, Interview 142, Tape 2, min 18:00ff.

that he exaggerates his response by saying, ‘I jump up a 100 metres away.’⁵⁷ To cope with the job, therefore, he stated,

I said to myself, ‘how can I do it’... and I said to myself, the only thing I can do, and this is why I don’t remember a lot of things, I said to myself, ‘I am a robot,’ and I did just this to my mind [makes hand gestures to turn off his mind] and said from now on close your eyes and do whatever needs to be done without asking too much.⁵⁸

Turning his mind off, Dario noted, allowed him to survive. He tells Stulberg that he ‘couldn’t survive by thinking every time that transport was coming or whether Moll was coming,’ that this would be the last, or by thinking of what it meant for the Jewish people.⁵⁹

Dario’s ‘robot’ mentality also helped him in the interview to recount his camp experiences. This is evident in his composure while digressing on what he had to do in the *Sonderkommando* and on the larger killing process of thousands of victims. In these segments of the video testimony, Dario maintained a calm composure, answering the questions with descriptive details. He convinces the viewer that by turning off his mind to what was happening, and what he was doing, that becoming a robot was the only way that he could carry out the work required of him. It is later in the interview, when Dario reflects on his journey back to Auschwitz where he confronted his past that he becomes emotionally overwhelmed.

Another way in which Dario constructs his testimony is by constantly referring to his desire to survive and to tell of his experiences while he was in the camp. He stated, ‘you’ll be surprised how the human mind and body can [survive] when you have the *volontà* [will] to live... I wasn’t giving up.’⁶⁰ When Stulberg asked what he thought it was that made him want to live, he replied, ‘Will to live and see the world. See what was going on, to tell.’⁶¹

This ‘will to live’, however, conflicted with what the Nazis wanted to happen to the *Sonderkommando*. Because the *Sonderkommando* facilitated the extermination process in death camps, they were in a position whereby they knew too much, as they were fully aware of the Nazis’ ‘Final Solution’. Because of this, the Nazis wanted the *Sonderkommando* killed before they were able to tell anyone, resulting in the constant turnover of *Sonderkommando* every few months.⁶² The search for *Sonderkommando* members, after leaving Auschwitz on the death march, was a significant reason why Dario took many years to tell his story. With urgency and an emphasis on the importance of what he is now telling, Dario stated,

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid. Otto Moll was a SS *Hauptscharführer*, squad leader, who was notorious for his precise gun aim and shot. *Sonderkommando* survivor Shlomo Dragon stated that ‘to amuse himself, Moll would pull someone out of the line, jam a burning cigarette into his mouth, and try to put out the cigarette with gunshots.’ Moll’s erratic and spontaneous behaviour is why Dario and other *Sonderkommando* and camp inmates feared and hated Moll. Shlomo Dragon, ‘Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: “Together - in Despair and in Hope”’ in Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 160.

60 D Gabbai, Interview 142, Tape 4, min 7:00ff.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.; Nechama Tec, ‘Resistance in Eastern Europe,’ in *The Holocaust Encyclopaedia*, ed. Walter Ze’ev Laqueur and Judith Tydor Baumel, (Ohio: Yale University Press, 2001), 547.

When I left Birkenau, every place I went the first thing they [the Nazis] were doing was ask who work in the *Sonderkommando*. They didn't want anyone alive in the *Sonderkommando*; they knew too much, we knew a lot. So we were with our lips sealed.⁶³

When the Russians were near Auschwitz and the SS were sparse in numbers, the *Sonderkommando* were able to blend in with other camp inmates. Thereafter, the Nazis continually asked and searched for the *Sonderkommando* when arriving at the Mauthausen, Ebensee, and Melk camps in Austria. As a result, Dario did not share his experiences for many years, and instead 'acted out' his trauma through repression and nightmares.⁶⁴

Dario's constant and vivid nightmares contributed to him changing from wanting to tell to wanting to forget.⁶⁵ Henry Greenspan suggests that the public in post-war America associated Holocaust survivors with the horrifying newsreels of the liberated camps, evoking 'a shifting combination of pity, fear, revulsion, and guilt.'⁶⁶ Moreover, Peter Novick suggests that survivors in the late 1940s frequently wanted to talk about their experiences but American society discouraged it. Therefore, the survivors silenced themselves and repressed their trauma, which later returned in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder.⁶⁷

A profound influence on Dario's construction of his testimony was his renewed desire to tell his experiences resulting from his visit to Auschwitz and other death camps in Poland between October 12 and 19 1996. A university teacher asked Dario to accompany him and a group of students on a study tour of Auschwitz and other camps because they wanted a survivor-guide. By agreeing to accompany them, Dario had to think about his experiences and try to make it relatable and comprehensible to a student audience. Doing so made Dario face and work-through the vivid memories and nightmares that he had repressed after the war. Telling Stulberg about his return trip to Auschwitz, and him telling his experiences with the group of students, Dario became emotional. He noted how the students were 'hungry for knowledge,' asked him about his experiences, and were supporting, understanding, and caring towards him and everything he told them.⁶⁸ When asked by Stulberg how he was now that he had undertaken the trip and shared his experience, Dario stated, 'Well I think I, I, something came out of my, my soul.'⁶⁹ This type of acceptance and understanding from the university students positively affected Dario and renewed his desire to tell his experiences.

Dario's desire to speak about his Holocaust experiences after his return home from Auschwitz-Birkenau was renewed by his realisation that there are nearly no *Sonderkommando* survivors left alive who can tell of their experiences and the full extent of Nazi cruelty and dehumanisation.⁷⁰ Therefore Dario realised he had to share his story because 'once they die no one will know.'⁷¹ The

63 Ibid.

64 LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 54.

65 D Gabbai, Interview 142, Tape 4, Tape 4, min 22:00ff.

66 Henry Greenspan, 'Imagining Survivors: Testimony and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness' in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, ed. Hilene Flanzbaum, (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 50.

67 Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), 3.

68 D Gabbai, Interview 142, Tape 4, min 25:00ff.

69 Ibid, Tape 4, min 25:50ff.

70 Ibid, Tape 3, min 3:40ff.

71 Ibid.

dates of his visit and his testimony also suggest this. Dario notes that his tour of Poland was from 12 to 19 October 1996 and the date of his testimony recording was 7 November 1996, nineteen days after his trip to Poland ended.⁷² Urgency, and the need to tell his camp experiences, are inherent in Dario's construction of his testimony, and is a reason behind the amount of detail Dario gives of the *Sonderkommando* and the killing process.

Conclusions

Ya'akov and Dario's testimonies offer a unique analysis demonstrating that a careful and critical inquiry of testimonies can tell audiences much about how individuals understand and construct their experiences. The Gabbai brothers share a similar history that they have each constructed in vastly different ways, with a 'robotic' mentality as one of the only similarities in the construction of their testimonies. Each of their geographies has had an impact on their testimony, as well as their post-war psyche.

Historian and literary theorist Zoë Waxman argues that 'to show that people are fallible and act just as human beings is not to demonize them, but to attempt to present a more rounded picture of responses to extreme suffering.'⁷³ This article has demonstrated Waxman's statement. As Ya'akov adopted a 'to pass, to last, to cast aside' mentality despite his defiant and defensive testimony, terrible nightmares and repression affected Dario's first ten years after the war. Dario's return to Auschwitz and his subsequent testimony to various audiences, both academic and public, suggest that he has come to a greater level of acceptance about his camp experiences than his brother Ya'akov.

Historian Lawrence Langer has also argued that a statement such as 'to understand, you have to go through it' 'underestimates the sympathetic power of the imagination.' Langer continues stating that now is the time to give the power of the imagination a worthy role in historiography.⁷⁴ Using one's imagination in Holocaust historiography allows audiences to better empathise with and understand survivor experiences. When undertaking a narrative inquiry of the Gabbai brothers' testimonies, this empathy leads to an understanding that they were people acting under severe duress and emotional, psychological, and physical strain. Considering how beneficial narrative inquiries are, as shown by these brothers' testimonies, imagine the benefit additional narrative inquiries of former prisoner functionaries could provide to contemporary understandings of the Holocaust and the prisoner functionary system.

⁷² Ibid, Tape 4, min 22:30ff.

⁷³ Zoë Vania Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 125.

⁷⁴ Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), xv.
