

## **Silent Witnesses: The Testimony of Objects in Holocaust Poetry and Prose**

The Holocaust brought about a crisis of testimony that led to critical engagement with the limits of representation by lawyers, historians, psychoanalysts, and poets. This question was first addressed by the architects of the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg (1945) who preferred incriminating documents produced by the perpetrators themselves over the testimony of their victims. A reversal was brought about 15 years later in the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem (1961), where the testimony of Holocaust survivors took center stage. In the last two decades another transformation has occurred, known as “the material turn”—the rising interest in material objects (from artworks to everyday objects) in anticipation of the death of the last survivors. This material turn was accompanied by a wave of restitution litigation over artwork looted by the Nazis.

In this article we offer a new theoretical perspective on the complicated issues raised by the material turn in Holocaust memory. What kind of testimony or voice can we attribute to objects? How can the testimony of objects change the relationship between law and literature in representations of the Holocaust? At the center of our discussion are three Jewish-Polish poetic testimonies written by Zuzanna Ginczanka, Władysław Szlengel, and Rachel Auerbach during the war in Poland, under Nazi occupation. Anticipating the crisis of testimony brought about by the new crime of genocide, these writers give voice to everyday objects and assign them the role of witnesses in an imagined future trial, held after the extinction of their communities. By introducing inanimate objects as privileged witnesses in an imagined Holocaust trial, we argue that these authors problematize the notion of courtroom testimony. By adopting and employing the rhetorical figure of the testifying object, these Jewish authors respond to the rich Western hu-

manist tradition of testament poetry, while at the same time performing acts of intervention. Our reading shows that these texts disrupt the continuity of the European convention of the testament poem, precisely by ascribing the testifying voice to Jewish things.

### Preface

#### “The Telephone”

With my broken and sick heart,  
with thoughts on the other side,  
I sat in the evening  
By my telephone.

I thought: I will call  
someone on the other side,  
when there comes my turn  
to sit by the telephone.

And soon I realize—  
God, there’s nobody to call,  
I went another way  
In 1939.

Our ways have parted,  
Friendships became stuck  
And suddenly, here I am,  
Without anybody to call. (Szlengel, 1943, pp. 38–41)

“The Telephone” was written in Polish by the Polish-Jewish poet Władysław Szlengel (1943/1987) in the Warsaw ghetto (*Oneg Szabat Program*, 2021). Szlengel’s poem is about the dreadful loneliness caused by being forced to move to the Warsaw ghetto away from the familiar habitus. Drawn back to the other, forbidden part of Warsaw where all his Polish acquaintances continue to live, the speaker longs to reconnect with old friends and neighbors. Yet his wish soon resolves into bitter realization:

“God, there’s nobody to call.” Here the poem shifts from the lyric mode to the satirical. Looking for some other channel of communication, the poet turns to the telephone’s speaking clock as a substitute for familiar interlocutors. Szlengel thus produces a Jewish variation of Cocteau’s (1928) *La Voix Humaine* by conducting an imaginary conversation with an automated female voice.<sup>2</sup>

Associating a broken human voice choked with tears and the voice of the machine, Szlengel conveys the loss of trust between the ghetto’s Jews and their former Polish neighbors. When Szlengel (1943/1987) writes, “It will be easier on the heart, knowing that when I call, someone on the other side will listen to me quietly,” the voice he craves to hear from the other side is of someone who shares memories of their hometown and is not afraid to talk with one who was cast out of it. In 1939 the telephone could still provide a means of communication to overcome the ghetto walls. Notwithstanding this technical possibility, such an effort is doomed to fail, according to Szlengel, as there is no one on the other side still trustworthy as an empathic listener. The poem thus tells us something about the precondition for a meaningful conversation. Ironically, only the automated voice can offer a substitute for a constant listener unaffected by the new political reality since 1939. Szlengel’s poem thus provides testimony to the betrayal and collapse of old friendships under German occupation.

Szlengel’s attempt to find empathic listeners on the other side of the city should also be seen as an attempt to turn former Polish neighbors into witnesses to the crisis experienced by their Jewish neighbors in the ghetto. The failure to so enlist Polish friends as witnesses that Szlengel’s “The Telephone” attests to should be read in light of Laub’s theory of the role of the empathic listener in Holocaust testimonies. The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dori Laub (1991) proposes to understand the Holocaust as “an event without a witness” (pp. 80–82). For Laub, the impossibility of bearing witness to the Holocaust is experienced by survivors as their psychological reality:

An empathic response was absent not only from the Nazis, but from fellow-citizens and allies as well (i.e. from society

at large) . . . Faith in the possibility of communication dies. And intrapsychically there may no longer be a matrix of two people—self and resonating other. Accordingly, we propose that an essential feature of the trauma suffered by a survivor of genocide is the victim's feeling of inability to affect the environment interpersonally so as to elicit a sense of mutuality. The victim feels that there is "no longer anyone on whom to count," as the link between self and other has been effaced by the failure of empathy. (Laub & Auerhahn, 1989, pp. 377–400)

Laub connects the failure of empathy in the Holocaust with the loss of "the very possibility of address."<sup>3</sup> As a result of the loss of trust in the other, the survivors also lost the ability to become witnesses to themselves. In Laub's view, becoming a witness to yourself is the very condition for becoming a subject. Thus, he suggested that belated testimony about traumatic events can potentially have a therapeutic effect. Laub's (1991) discussion addresses the extreme conditions of the camps, and the continuing effects on the possibility of becoming a witness years after the traumatic event.

Szlengel's poem locates the problem of testimony as early as the creation of the ghetto. As a testimony poem it broadcasts, to fellow Polish citizens, Jewish anxieties and fears about their unknown fate. It is only at a later stage, faced by the deportations, and as the possibility of being helped by outside witnesses has been lost for good, that he turns to a witnessing that remains inside. He searches for ways in which the ghetto's Jewish inhabitants could give testimony beyond their deaths, and in his poem "Things," he assigns everyday inanimate objects the role of witnesses to the Holocaust.

The gesture of turning objects into witnesses to the Holocaust is a common trope in Holocaust poetry and writing, which is concerned with everyday objects confiscated from their Jewish owners, pillaged by the Germans, and looted by the Jews' Polish neighbors (Grynberg, 1979; Shallcross, 2011). In this article, we examine the role of Jewish personal belongings both as speaking objects and as witnesses. Can the objects be considered reliable witnesses? Can they be a vehicle for com-

municating the memories and experiences of their dead Jewish owners? What witnessing possibilities are given by everyday objects, abandoned or looted, in a quest for postwar justice?

The question of witnessing is a quintessentially legal question, and indeed the attempt to bring the perpetrators of the Holocaust to justice led to the establishment of new international crimes and legal procedures. The main track was that of international criminal law, beginning with the Nuremberg trials in 1945–1946. Five decades later, after the end of the Cold War, a second wave of Holocaust litigation that was focused on the restitution of looted art led to transnational civil litigation in American courts over famous works of art. But none of these legal tracks dealt with everyday objects—the huge category of heirless objects that became silent witnesses to the genocidal murder of their Jewish owners, and witnesses to the everyday, mundane looting committed by members of local communities. How can one give voice to these mundane aspects of the genocide? These issues were relegated to domestic courts—but in Poland, after the eradication of the Jewish community, few survivors were left to testify and tell the story. Moreover, during the postwar years, the looting continued in different ways, resulting in a huge process of redistribution of Jewish property and the rise of a new Polish middle class.

Polish neighbors of Jews considered themselves victims of Nazi aggression. This also raises the difficult question of how to approach the issue of collaboration, which belongs to the grey zone, a term coined by Primo Levi and referring to the German system that turned victims into victimizers, thus blurring the moral lines between them (Levi, 1989, p. 42). How could acts of betrayal pertaining to grey zones be recounted and judged?

The texts we discuss here are testimonial, and they tackle the problem of testimony on two levels. First, the writers regard their accusatory testimony as a legal and pragmatic problem that needed to be recorded so that it could be heard in a future trial. Second, the authors create literary testaments bestowing their personal objects, memories, and literary legacy to future readers, now that their community has vanished, trust has been fundamentally broken, and the very bonds of humanity have been shattered. The focus on everyday objects and artifacts in

these poems that constantly shift between the legal and poetic registers provides us with a key to a new conception of voice through the testimony of inanimate objects as appropriate witnesses to the Holocaust.

### Zuzanna Ginczanka

#### *A Jewish Philomela*

#### Non Omnis Moriar

*Non omnis moriar*—my proud estate,  
 of table linen fields and wardrobes staunch  
 like fortresses, with precious bedclothes, sheets,  
 bright dresses—all remain behind me now.  
 And as I did not leave here any heir  
 You, Chomin's wife, the snitch's daring wife,  
 Volksdeutcher's mother, swift informant, please  
 Allow your hand to dig up Jewish things.  
 May they serve you and yours, and not some strangers.  
 "My dear ones"—it's no song, nor empty name.  
 I do remember you, and when the Schupo came,  
 You did remember me. Reminded them of me.  
 So let my friends all sit with goblets raised  
 To toast my memory and their own wealth,  
 their drapes and kilims, candlesticks and bowls.  
 And may they drink all night, till break of dawn,  
 And then begin to search for jewels and gold  
 In mattresses and sofas, quilts and rugs.  
 Oh, and what quick work they'll make of it  
 Thick clumps of horsehair, sea grass stuffing, clouds  
 of cushions torn and puffs of eiderdown  
 Will coat their hands and turn their arms to wings  
 My blood will bind these fibers with fresh down,  
 And thus transform these winged ones to angels. (Ginc-  
 zanka, 2012, p. 188)

Zuzanna Ginczanka (1917–1944) was born in Kiev in 1917 as Zuzanna Polina Ginchburg to a wealthy assimilated Jewish family. From a young age she was fascinated with Polish culture and literature. One of her early Polish poems drew the attention of Julian Tuwim.<sup>4</sup> In the 1930s the young Ginczanka was already a familiar figure in the Warsaw literary milieu (Leociak, 2015; Druck, 2016). From 1941 Ginczanka went into hiding, first in Lviv<sup>5</sup> and then in Kraków. She most probably wrote “Non Omnis Moriar” while hiding in 1942 under a false identity in the highly precarious situation in which Jews had lost the protection of the law and were being hunted by the police and their neighbors (Haska, 2010, p. 313). It is the only war poem by Ginczanka that survived. The poem was discovered on a crumpled sheet of paper given to Ginczanka’s friend, Lusja Stauber after the war. The poem, “Non Omnis Moriar,” reveals the problematics of giving valid testimony to the world about the poet’s experience as a Jew living undercover. In these underground conditions, Ginczanka is forced to give her testimony in disguise by using the form of a satirical testament poem that provides incriminating evidence for a future criminal trial. The poem compensates for the poet’s inability to testify as an eyewitness in a future trial, and provides Ginczanka with the possibility of becoming a witness to herself. The poem shows her awareness that she was most likely not going to survive the war. To preserve her voice for a future trial posthumously, she needs to turn the poem into material evidence.

The poem deals with the fate of Ginczanka’s personal belongings. The poet is concerned with the question of to whom these things should be bequeathed given that she has no heirs. She employs the legal device of testament as a pretext to indicate the names of her housekeeper and her son as her inheritors. But in fact, the poem does just the opposite as it exposes those who denounced Ginczanka to the SS and dispossessed her of her personal belongings. Thus, the poem reveals its performative function as a legal indictment. Indeed, against all odds, this poem survived the war and served as material evidence in the postwar criminal trial of the housekeeper and her son.<sup>6</sup>

Ginczanka opens her poem with a self-declarative phrase, one that oscillates between the spoken and the written. In bor-

rowing the famous idiom, *non omnis moriar* ("Not all of me will die") from Horace's last poem, which closes his third book of *Odes*, Ginczanka not only alludes to a Roman poem, but also refers to its Romantic reception both as a testament poem and as a common epitaph inscribed on gravestones (e.g., Harris, 1911/2000, p. 150). Speaking through the Horatian canon, Ginczanka aligns her Jewish testimony with the classical literary tradition, which had a prominent place in Poland and from whose political and cultural territories she has been debarred. Like Horace, Ginczanka places herself between the present and the future, between memory and forgetfulness. Can the human voice triumph over mortality? Can it overcome inevitable death and continue to resonate in the future? Can the poet's voice survive genocide?

The question of the immortality of the voice and its potentiality to resist human fragility has been central to poetry from its very beginning, and in this sense, Horace's *Ode* (3.30) can be seen as a challenge to the ancient Homeric topos (e.g., Homer, *Iliad*, 2.484–494), which presents the fickle human voice as antithetical to the unfaltering voice of the divine Muses:

I have built a monument more lasting than bronze,  
That looms above royal deserted pyramids,  
That no eroding rain nor raving wind  
Can ever crumble, nor the unnumbered  
Series of years, the flight of generations.  
I shall not wholly die; my greater part  
Escapes the poor goddess of funerals. (Horace, *Odes*,  
3.30, 1–7; see Armstrong, 1989, p. 116)

Referring to his poetry as a "monument," Horace constructs his voice as immaterial and imperishable. The voice of the poet is the only part of him that remains vital after his death. The witness to a life, it commemorates the poet's achievements. As an immaterial monument, the poet's voice surpasses the durability of grand objects of commemoration built by great kings and wealthy people. Whereas ostentatious funerary monuments are doomed to deterioration by nature's blows and human carelessness, the poet's voice continues to exist as long as there is a community that shares his cultural and literary tradition:



So long as pontifex  
 And silent virgin still ascend the Capitol . . .  
 In my homeland, I will be called the first to bring  
 Aeolian singing into Italian music. (Horace, *Odes*, 3.30.  
 9–14; see Armstrong, 1989, p. 116)

Unlike Horace, Ginczanka turns to material objects as envoys or spokespeople. These are domestic, everyday objects, perishable textiles, and worn-out things, Ginczanka's personal belongings comprising everything she possesses. They shall remain the only witnesses to her life after her death. Thus, Ginczanka's classical allusion gives an ironic twist to Horace's claim to immortality. Ginczanka not only addresses perishable objects but also grants them legal authority by making them her witnesses. Enumerating the things that she owns and wishes to bequeath after her death to her neighbors raises their value and releases these monetarily valueless things from commodification. By listing the textile items, the table linen, wardrobes, bed clothes, sheets and dresses, the poem, a textual weaving, displays them side by side. Thus, these modest belongings, the poet's textiles, are transformed by her poetry into a "proud estate." Whereas Horace divests his poetic testament of materiality, Ginczanka's poem recovers the materiality of her poetic testament.

This allows Ginczanka to encode an indictment against Mrs. Chomin, the housekeeper of the building in Lviv where Ginczanka was hiding. Disguising her poem as a will, Ginczanka presents herself as a generous heirless testator bequeathing her orphaned possessions to Chomin and her son:

And as I did not leave here any heir  
 You, Comin's wife, the snitch's daring wife,  
 Volksdeutcher's mother, swift informer, do  
 Allow your hand to dig up Jewish things.<sup>7</sup>

As an encoded indictment, the poetic testament exposes the heirs' names as perpetrators. Ginczanka inscribes Chomin's guilt in the euphemistic epithet, "Volksdeutcher's mother," who remorselessly took the role of "swift informer." Ginczanka's will not only hands over her estate to Chomin and her son, but

also entrusts them with the task of ravaging it. The testament poem immortalizes the crime through the image of the avaricious hands of Chomin and her son rummaging in Ginczanka's Jewish things. Ginczanka's textiles preserve the memory of a Jewish body, but they also offer a textual substitution for Ginczanka's no-longer-living voice. The textile trope discloses the poem's subversive form of textuality typical of the myth of the feminine weaver.

Ginczanka's poem belongs to a long tradition of woven documents created by voiceless women who are politically and socially bereft of citizen rights. We refer here to Ovid's version of the tale in *Metamorphoses* (6.424–674), which centers on Philomela's paradigmatic role as a weaver who was brutally raped by her sister's husband and then imprisoned by him in the woods, away from the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> To make sure that her testimony shall never be heard, the monstrous sister's husband cuts out her tongue. Excluded from the world, expelled from the law, Philomela produces a work of weaving whose purpose is both testimony and restitution. By weaving the story of the atrocity, Philomela records the crime and concomitantly gains restitution for her voice. But unlike Ginczanka's Jewish testimony, the Ovidian Philomela has a specific implied reader in mind, a blood relative whom she fully trusts. The woven fabric is thus sent, rolled up, to Procne, Philomela's sister, conveying a hidden message that—once deciphered by Philomela's reader—calls for retribution. Unlike Philomela, Ginczanka anticipates a future in which no Jews survive and hence has to entrust her encoded poem to an anonymous court. Her poem thus reveals hope in the revival of the justice system.

Ginczanka moves on, however, to supplement Earthly justice with that of the divine. Following the spectacle of the Ovidian metamorphoses, the outcome of Procne's horrifying revenge—her sisters and her husband grow wings and take to the sky as birds—*Ginczanka* imagines the Polish looters transformed into winged angels:

Thick clumps of horsehair, sea grass stuffing, clouds  
Of cushions torn and puffs of eiderdown  
Will coat their hands and turn their arms to wings.

My blood will bind these fibers with fresh down,  
And thus transform these winged ones to angels. (Ginczanka, 2012, p. 188)

Ginczanka's enigmatic picture renders an idiosyncratic version of Horace's "Non Omnis Moriar," situated in the anti-Semitic vision of a world without Jews. This picture has the power to haunt Polish readers who take pleasure in the metaphysical beauty of the angelic transformation of the lost souls of their kindred, flying on wings made from Ginczanka's looted down. A Christian vision of redemption is thus made to pulsate with fresh Jewish blood, a reminder of the uneradicated guilt of this modern crime. Ginczanka's poem ends with an image of Jewish blood, which resonates with the Bible's "the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground" (Genesis 4.10).

*The Poem Takes the Witness Stand in Chomin's Trial*

Against all odds, the title-less poem that Ginczanka wrote on a crumpled piece of paper miraculously survived the war, while she herself was denounced and murdered in a Nazi camp.<sup>9</sup> Her poetic vision anticipating a future trial came true, and the poem was submitted as evidence in the criminal trial against Zofia Chomin and her son, Marian Chomin, who were accused of collaborating with the German occupiers by helping them find Jews hiding in the tenement at No. 8a Jablonowskich Street in Lvov.<sup>10</sup> What legal force was entrusted to the voice of the dead poet in the Polish court room? Could the trial legally validate her words and turn her poetical testament into an incriminating testimony?

The trial against the Chomins was one of thousands collectively known as the August trials, named after the decree of August 31, 1944, of the Polish Provisional Government, establishing special courts in Poland with jurisdiction over Nazi war criminals and Polish collaborators (Kornbluth, 2021, p. 7). Seven trials were conducted against high-ranking Nazi war criminals, such as Amon Goeth, who served as the commandant of the Kraków-Płaszów concentration camp where Ginczanka was murdered. These trials were conducted concomitantly with

the Nuremberg trials, and in them the new crime of genocide (a term coined by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer) was first recognized. In these trials Jews played a central role as lawyers, judges, and as victims summoned to give testimony about the genocide (Finder & Prusin, 2019). In contrast, in the majority of the August trials in which Polish collaborators were indicted, and in particular in trials against Poles who denounced Jews, the voice of Jewish survivors was largely absent.<sup>11</sup> These trials did not create a public forum in which Jewish witnesses could be heard and accuse their Polish neighbors. Few Jews survived the genocide, and those who did and sought to return to their homes and property often encountered a hostile community, and were even exposed to pogroms (such as the famous Kielce pogrom; Gross & Grudzinska Gross, 2016, p. 29). Kornbluth (2021) writes that the looting and robbery of Jewish property that began during the war continued in the postwar era. Jews who deposited their belongings with their neighbors and returned to claim them, found themselves in danger for their lives (p. 61). In fact, according to Kornbluth (2021), during the war the massive looting of Jewish property was no exception but the rule:

while the instantaneous acquisition of property that had accumulated over a lifetime, a house, or even a few bolts of fabric might have been a tempting prospect, many people were moved to murder Jews for significantly less . . . [even for] a pair of the victim's shoes. (p. 62)<sup>12</sup>

The massive property transfers that began during the German occupation continued after the war under the Soviet regime, and brought about "an unexpected revolution that transformed Polish society creating a new Polish middle class" (Kornbluth, 2021, p. 43; Gross & Grudzinska Gross, 2016, pp. 44, 106). Even though the August trials were meant to bring the collaborators and informers to justice, property theft and robbery were excluded from their jurisdiction. In fact, economic (as opposed to political or anti-Semitic) motives for collaboration were considered exonerating factors (Kornbluth, 2021, p. 263).

In the trial against the Chomins, several witnesses testified about their reprehensible conduct regarding their tenant,

Ginczanka. They testified about the spite and anti-Semitism Mrs. Chomin showed toward her Jewish tenants, and how she informed on them and robbed them. Mrs. Chomin, however, denied all allegations (Haska, 2010). Several witnesses testified against her, among them Ginczanka's close friend, Ludwika Karwowska (formerly Lucia Stauber). In November 1945 she told the court about the circumstances in which the poem was written and submitted the poem as evidence. She testified that "on her frequent visits by German police, knowing that Jewish people were living in the tenement, Mrs. Chomin informed them how and where they could be found." The witness also explained the circumstances of the poem's creation: "still shocked by Mrs. Chomin's behavior, Zuzanna Ginczanka wrote the poem called 'Testament,' which I submit."<sup>13</sup> She added that, "In July 1944 Ginczanka was murdered in a camp." Apart from the poem, which from a narrow legal standpoint is not considered valid legal testimony (since the person who wrote it is no longer alive and cannot be interrogated about her accusations), she testified that

I clearly remember the following event in which Ginczanka was involved. Ms. Fradys told me about it. At the beginning of August 1941 German police came to the tenement to take Ginczanka, but she managed to buy herself out. During that time Mrs. Chomin was standing in the gate, and when she noticed that the Germans were returning empty-handed she called for another patrol. She explained to them that the Jewess in hiding had bought herself out and made this patrol go for Ginczanka. (Haska, 2010)

We see again that the incriminating testimony is hearsay, as the witness only heard it from Ms. Fradys, who hid with Ginczanka and was later murdered. From a narrow legal standpoint, this testimony, relating back to the testimonies of two dead Jewish women, is not valid.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it was met by Chomin's complete denial of the allegations against her, claiming that she never even knew Zuzanna Ginczanka. Several other witnesses testified in the trial and drew an incriminating portrait of Mrs. Chomin. For example, Lieutenant Marcelli Stauber testified on August 7,

1946, that the police could have received the information only from the Chomins. He tells the court how at this time Ginczanka had managed to escape and return home, and that she told him afterward that when Mrs. Chomin saw her, “she went pale with terror.” Another witness, Zofia Karpinska, testified that

from the moment the Germans marched into Lvov, Chomin’s family had been committing robberies. When I was in their apartment a couple of times, I saw things from the Red Army, and they often threw booze-ups. I heard they invited guests, the din they were making, and I could hear arguments and brawls, for I lived above them. (Haska, 2010, p. 317)

These court testimonies show us how well Ginczanka’s poem captured the likeness of the Chomins. Yet the evidence against her consisted mainly of hearsay testimonies that are suspect from a legal point of view, and therefore could not provide the ultimate proof.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of a prolonged trial, the son, Marian Chomin, was acquitted. His mother, Zofia Chomin, was convicted and given a lenient sentence of four years’ imprisonment. She was also deprived of public and honorary civil rights for two years, and her property was confiscated by the state. The court justified the lenient sentence by the “unsophistication of the woman,” and because Zofia Chomin “did not feel particular hatred toward Jews. It was more that she performed her caretaker duties too rigorously” (Haska, 2010, p. 326). As in Kafka’s parable, the law that was crucial for Ginczanka in providing her with a language and a means to convey her accusations beyond her death opened its gates for her poem, only to close them more firmly in the court’s empathic attitude toward Mrs. Chomin.<sup>16</sup>

### Władysław Szlengel

#### *“The Key Is With the Concierge”: A Testamental Poem*

Władysław Szlengel (1912–1943) was a Polish-Jewish poet who published his satirical poems in newspapers and literary

magazines before the war in Poland. He was part of the literary and theatrical milieu in Warsaw. Unlike Ginczanka, he did not hide on the Aryan side, but moved with Warsaw's Jews into the ghetto. He wrote his poems in the ghetto, reading them aloud at poetic evenings in Café Sztuka on Leszno Street. Szlengel's poems were recited and memorized by Jews in the ghetto and were part of a heroic collective endeavor to preserve cultural life, and to lift spirits in the difficult circumstances of persecution, starvation, disease, deportation, and mass murder (Kassow, 2009, pp. 316–324). Szlengel wrote about the simple people and often gave voice to their everyday objects (the telephone, the pot of soup, the hat, and so on), turning them into witnesses of their owners' sad fate. Szlengel treated his poems as historical notes, "poem-documents." Anticipating the total destruction of the ghetto, Szlengel (1943/1987) entrusted to these objects the role of telling the history of the Jewish victims by transmitting the stories of anonymous people to the future world:

With all my being I feel I am suffocating as the air in my sunken boat slowly gives out . . . But here I am, in the boat. And although I am no captain, I still think that I should at least write the chronicle of those who have sunk to the bottom. I don't want to leave behind only statistics. Through my poems, sketches, and writings I want to enrich (a bad word, I know) the historical record that will be written in the future. On the wall of my submarine, I scrawl my poem-documents. To my companions, I, a poet of 1943 AD, am reading my scribblings.<sup>17</sup>

Szlengel's book of poems, *What I Read to the Dead*, reflects the realization of the approaching destruction of the Jews of the ghetto. Szlengel's somber realization can be seen in the transformation of the book's implied readers. The book's historical audience was comprised of readers who disappeared, one by one, from the living. In the preface to the book, Szlengel (1943/1987) explains how the disappearance of the book's readers forced him to rethink the book's potential readership:

These poem-documents were supposed to be read to human beings who believed they would survive. I was supposed to look back with them at this volume as a diary of a dreadful period, which to our joy would have passed. Memories from the bottom of hell—but the comrades of my wandering have disappeared, and the poems became in one hour the poems which I read to the dead. (p. 15)

Wishing to give a voice to the dead, Szlengel (1943/1987) ends the preface to his book with a plea: “This is our history. These are poems that I read to the dead. Read them!” (p. 24). This request has become a poetic testament, as Szlengel did not survive the war and died in the ghetto.<sup>18</sup> After the destruction of the ghetto, Szlengel’s poetic legacy was forgotten for many years. But the poems themselves, or some of them, have survived. The manuscript of *What I Read to the Dead* was buried in milk jars under the Warsaw ghetto together with the clandestine Oyneg Shabes archive—an archive initiated by the Jewish historian Emmanuel Ringelblum, who undertook to document the lives and deaths of the Jewish occupants of the ghetto.<sup>19</sup> This Jewish “treasure,” as Rachel Auerbach, one of the only three surviving members of the archive group called it, remained intact under the ruins of the ghetto. It was through her relentless efforts that substantial parts of the archive were found and restored, among which were Szlengel’s poems.<sup>20</sup>

Ringelblum himself called Szlengel “the poet of the ghetto” (Kassow, 2009, p. 316), and in the introduction to her Hebrew translation of the book, Helena Birenbaum, herself a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, recounts how Szlengel’s poems were read in the evenings in homes in the ghetto, and passed from hand to hand in various copies, and communicated in whispers. “These poems,” Birenbaum writes, “were a living mirror to our feelings, thoughts, ideals, hopes, and the pain of the pitiless struggle for each moment of life: every second—until the bitter end.”<sup>21</sup> Birenbaum describes the role of Szlengel’s poems, which she knew by heart, in preserving the memories of the ghetto period; and she was able to transmit them from memory to her Israeli friends. It was 40 years after the end of



the war when by mere chance she discovered a Polish edition of Szlengel's book, published in 1977:<sup>22</sup>

I began to search with passion among these poems "of mine," which I knew from then. I found them one after the other, like addresses of homes in which I had once lived, like precious people I haven't seen for many years. They were all here. All of them. (p. 10)

At the center of Szlengel's "The Key Is with the Concierge" is the poet's fur coat (Szlengel, 1947; 1943/1987, p. 57). The poem comes from the first stage of Szlengel's ghetto writing, in which he was still searching for witnesses from outside, and describes how his fur coat was stolen by the concierge, Szlengel's former friend, who denounced him. In subject matter and structure, "The Key Is with the Concierge" and Ginczanka's "Non Omnis Moriar" display similar features. Both poems reflect disillusionment with the poets' Polish neighbors under German occupation, and express similar experiences of expropriation, betrayal, and abandonment. Written as an address, the poet discloses the name of the concierge, Wiśniewski. The speaker and his imaginary addressee are described as old acquaintances. The two compatriots fought together in the campaign of September 1939 to protect Warsaw, their hometown, from the German invaders. They used to be drinking companions. These shared memories, however, are recounted against the discovery of Wiśniewski's betrayal, denouncing Szlengel to the Germans for pure avarice, the desire to own his friend's fur coat:

You won the war, my Wiśniewski,  
 You no longer spare a thought for tomorrow—  
 How is it to wander, drunken scoundrel, in my fur so  
 easily gained?  
 It's obvious that you have to hand me over,  
 It's obvious that I worry you—  
 The one fur—mine, by itself, won't warm us both  
 I lost to you, my Wiśniewski—  
 There's really no one to be angry with—  
 This is what happens, when one entrusts  
 The keys of the future . . . with the concierge . . . <sup>23</sup>

Episodes of stolen everyday objects belong to a twilight zone where ties of friendship and feelings of estrangement are no longer distinct. It is the grey ethical zone that interests Szlengel, and through it he unravels the unsettled relationship between Jews and their Polish neighbors. The war that united the Jewish poet and the Polish concierge in a common cause of defending their Poland against the common enemy—the Germans—divided them after Warsaw’s defeat. The German victory turned the war against an external enemy into an internal war between fellow citizens. In the latter war, Szlengel writes, Wiśniewski has won. Polish victory is hyperbole, denoting “petty thefts.” Szlengel’s bitter observation on the nature of human relationship put under an external threat of survival does not lack compassion: “You won the war, my Wiśniewski . . . it’s obvious that you have to hand me over . . . the one fur won’t warm us both.” In a world where trust is broken, there’s no point in accusing the concierge. Szlengel blames himself for depositing the keys of his apartment with Wiśniewski. His personal failure to read the new ethical norms leads Szlengel to call for a collective self-reckoning. Szlengel’s poem thus mourns the fact that Polish Jews deposited not only the keys of their apartments but also the keys to their future with their Polish neighbors.<sup>24</sup>

This poem of personal indictment was not included in Szlengel’s book, *What I Read to the Dead*. In the introduction to the book, Szlengel adds “a note for pedantic readers” in which he explains this decision precisely in terms of the sensitivities of its intended Polish readers. He decided in favor of

[p]ostponing the publication of such a controversial subject (the poem’s title should not be understood literally) to different days when the brown monsters who now go wild with nationalist passion will lose their inflamed hues, and when it will be possible to quietly settle accounts with neighbors for their sins.<sup>25</sup>

Szlengel hoped for better times in the future when such a complicated and painful subject could be openly discussed. Acts of self-censorship are typical of both Szlengel’s and Ginc-

zanka's personal indictment poems. Whereas Szlengel prefers the strategy of deferral, Ginczanka employs one of disguise, dissimulating her accusation against her neighbor, Mrs. Chomin, in the legal form of a testament.

*"Things": Witnesses from Within*

*What I Read to the Dead* attempts to find witnesses from within. Szlengel writes because he does not want to leave behind only numbers and statistics of dead people. Facing the mass murder and anonymous death in Treblinka, he wishes to write their history, to tell their stories. In his poem, "Things," Szlengel finds a surprising way to testify to the Jews' fates. He describes the history of the Warsaw ghetto from its beginning to the great deportation as an endless procession of Jewish belongings transported on cars and carts, carried on people's backs or held in their hands. At every stage of this process of emptying the ghetto, people were deprived of more personal objects. Szlengel describes the fate of the objects, packed by their Jewish owners in their frequent forced moves from one apartment to ever smaller spaces. In each move, packages became smaller until they had to be abandoned altogether as their owners march to their deaths. In this way, Szlengel's "Things" describes the collective fate of the Jews of the ghetto through the fate of their personal belongings.

"Things" reads like a mechanical enumeration, the recitation of a list of things, personal belongings, shrinking in size and number at each station in the forced wanderings of the Jews in the ghetto.<sup>26</sup> These lists of objects anticipate the systematic looting of Jewish objects that was undertaken by the Nazis in the death camp, Treblinka, as they sorted through the objects to be sent on for recirculation in the Third Reich. David Roskies writes that "in six syncopated stanzas, the poem recapitulates the methodical murder of Polish Jewry. Each stanza represents, metonymically, another station of the cross," through a discussion not of the individuals but of the things they must carry "as the owners are dispossessed and moved to ever more desolate and restricted quarters" (Roskies, 2019, p. 26):

From Hoza Street and Marszałkowska  
carts were moving, Jewish carts:  
    Furniture, tables and chairs,  
    suitcases, bundles  
    and chests, boxes and bedding,  
    suits and portraits,  
    pots, linen and wall hangings,  
    cherry brandy, big jars and little jars,  
    glasses, tea pots and silver,  
    books, knickknacks and everything  
    go from Hoza Street to Śliska.  
    A bottle of vodka in a coat pocket  
    and a chunk of sausage,  
    on carts and wagons and rickshaws  
    the gloomy band is going.  
And from Śliska Street to Niska everything  
all over again went moving:  
    Furniture, tables and chairs,  
    suitcases and bundles,  
    and pots—gents that's it.  
    Now there is no carpet,  
    of silverware not a sign,  
    no cherry brandy this time.  
    No suits or boots  
    or jars or portraits.  
    Already all these trifles  
    were left on Śliska.  
    In the pocket a bottle of vodka  
    And a chunk of sausage,  
    on carts and wagons and rickshaws  
    the gloomy band is going.<sup>27</sup>

Each station of this Jewish Via Dolorosa forces the owners to dispense with more things. Szlengel ends the description of the voyage of the dead by honing in on the last object of all these Jewish things—a bottle of water with a poison pill:

Nights cooler, days shorter,  
tomorrow . . . maybe day after tomorrow . . .  
to a whistle, a shout or command  
on the Jewish road again  
hands free and only  
water—with a strong pill. (Roskies, 2019, pp. 214–218)

The only sign of these things' former owners is a dreadful picture of emptiness, namely, the ghetto without the Jews:

Life, Jewish life is growing / in houses that are empty. /  
In abandoned apartments / abandoned bundles, / suits  
and down covers / and plates and chairs . . . there are  
family photographs / scattered in a hurry. / A book lies  
still open, / a letter in midsentence: / “bad . . .”

However, very soon afterward, new occupants enter the “dead” Jewish apartments:

Ownerless things lie around,  
a dead apartment stands waiting  
until new people  
populate the rooms: Aryans they  
will close the open windows,  
. . .  
put the books on a shelf and empty  
the coffee from the glass,  
together they will finish the hand of bridge. (Roskies,  
2019, pp. 214–218)

Szlengel's things, unlike their Jewish owners, have an afterlife. They are taken by the Aryan Poles who enter the abandoned apartments, close open books, and continue card games as if nothing has intervened. Facing this injustice, this indifference to the fate of the dead Jewish owners, Szlengel, like Ginczanka's in “Non Omnis Moriar,” imagines poetic justice.

And in the night of fear that will come,  
 after days of bullets and swords  
 all the Jewish things will come out  
 from chests and houses.  
 And they will run out through the windows,  
 walk down the streets  
 until they meet on the roads,  
 on the black rails.  
 All the tables and chairs  
 and suitcases, bundles  
 the suits and jars  
 and silverware and teapots  
 will leave, and disappear,  
 and no one will guess what it means  
 that the things have departed,  
 no one will see them. (Roskies, 2019, pp. 214–218)

Szlengel imagines that the Jewish things, glasses and silverware, bedcovers, and so on, have a will of their own and so will refuse to follow the new owners. One day they will leave their new homes behind, marching the streets like their former Jewish owners, and disappear forever, leaving behind them a void. Justice is imagined by the poet not in the form of the return or restitution of things to their rightful heirs, but just the opposite—as the exodus of what remained in the abandoned apartments. The empty apartments, kitchens, and rooms will thus become silent witnesses to the Holocaust. The Jews will continue to be present in Poland only through the empty spaces created by the Jewish objects' self-evacuation.<sup>28</sup>

Szlengel concludes "Things" with a vision of a future courtroom trial, and it is in this legal setting that the last Jewish object makes a second appearance in the poem as evidence, *corpus delicti*:

no one will see them.  
 But on the judge's table  
 (if *veritas victi*)<sup>29</sup>  
 a pill will remain  
 as a *corpus delicti*.<sup>30</sup>

It is a scene of Earthly justice. The poison pill reappears in the imagined future trial of the Jews' murderers. It functions as a *corpus delicti*, a legal term meaning both a "material substance" (the body of the murdered victim) and the "substantial evidence" necessary to prove the commission of the crime. The poison pill is the only material evidence for the future trial. With these words Szlengel anticipates the limits of the law to do justice to the "crime without a witness," which killed all its victims and left no material trace of their bodies. A bodiless crime leaves only the pill as a *corpus delicti*. The new crime explodes the rules of procedure of objective proof meant to expose the truth (*veritas*). What will become of the legal demand to present a corpus as objective evidence in light of the totality of the crime of genocide? Will a literary corpus, such as a poem, substitute for the lack of physical evidence, as in the August trial of Mrs. Chomin?<sup>31</sup> For Szlengel, however, the use of the Latin legal terminology as the language of justice designates a return to the humanist tradition that has been shattered in times of crisis.

### Rachel Auerbach

#### *The Weeping of Dead Things*

Rachel Auerbach was born in 1903 in Poland. Fluent in Polish and Yiddish, she was active in Lviv and Warsaw in literary and philosophical circles. From 1933, she worked in Warsaw as a journalist, literary critic, and translator. During the war she became part of the Oyneg Shabes group in the Warsaw ghetto under the leadership of Emmanuel Ringelblum. She survived on the Aryan side, and after the war was an active member of the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland. After her emigration to Israel, Auerbach founded the Department for the Collection of Witness Testimonies at Yad Vashem and helped open the Eichmann trial to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors (Cohen, 2008; Bilsky, 2021; Polit, 2012).

In the essay "The Weeping of Dead Things," Auerbach provides a phenomenological analysis of the state of objects that belonged to the Jews in the ghetto.<sup>32</sup> Why are the objects,

and not the people, selected as the focus of her observations? What can an object say beyond human testimony to the condition of humanity? In 1942, Auerbach's scrutiny of the daily life of the ghetto was a heroic act of documentation. Aware of the approaching ruin, Auerbach anticipated its total destruction, including the possibility that no trace of the Jewish present in the ghetto would be left behind. The documentary effort in "The Weeping of Dead Things" was to capture a foreboding reality for the sake of the future.

Walking in the ghetto after the great deportation of 1942, Auerbach is attentive to the sound of muteness hovering everywhere.<sup>33</sup> Like a ghost town, the ghetto is empty of living voices. The barren streets, the long rows of buildings, and in particular, the apartment windows gaping open forever, seem to raise a cry, "the worst of any scream" (Auerbach, 1954, p. 131). The uncanny image of the windows haunts her the most, their seeming like dead people's eyes. Wide open, they are like the eyes of the dead, who have no relative to gently close their eyelids. Death is figured in the absence of the ghetto inhabitants. Things are scattered everywhere in the streets, evoking their own homelessness, lacking human owners. Humiliated by their disorder, disfunction and neglect, the Jews' things communicate to the onlooker an experience of abandonment and orphanage:

Oh, the crying of things abandoned forever by their owners, humiliated in strangers' hands. They were like corpses denied a proper burial, with no one to do right by them. Rolling in heaps of garbage, piled on top of each other like piles of dead bodies in the shed of a Jewish cemetery during epidemics and famine, naked and sacrilegiously violated. He who has not seen the weeping of dead things has not seen or heard in his life anything sad. (Auerbach, 1954, p. 131)

Auerbach describes herself moving through fog, walking in the silent and deserted streets as in a sad dream. *Żelazna*, *Nowolipia*, *Smocza* . . . all names of well-known streets she no longer recognizes. She lacks an overall perspective on the new reality



of the ghetto, the decoding of which requires a shift in perception. In the new phase, nature is dissimulated. A peculiar fluttering of white stuff collected by the wind leads Auerbach to wonder, “what kind of snow is this, suddenly at this time?” But there is no snow in the downfall of the ghetto, only a mock snow made of feathers let loose from the bed quilts and cushions of murdered people.

How can this new form of visibility be processed? How can these inconceivable sights become part of the visual?<sup>34</sup> Auerbach’s (1954) brief remark alluding to the history of European painting tradition, “Oh this peculiar still life of the dying ghetto!” (p. 133) is an attempt to find a visual framework against which the baffling sight of the ghetto’s atrophy could be elucidated.<sup>35</sup> An archive of still life images refreshes the memory of another world, beyond the ghetto, before totalitarian times. Hanging on the walls of bourgeois living rooms, national museums, private art collections, or photographed in art books, images of still life bring to mind a great diversity of everyday life objects, living and dead, natural products and humanly made. Auerbach’s growing interest in everyday objects is inseparable from both respect for ordinary things and the degradations of consumption culture, which is indifferent to the question of the value and the social costs of a commodity.<sup>36</sup>

How, for example, could a 17th-century still life painting, especially Dutch or Flemish, produced in a society experiencing for the first time the problem of massive oversupply, offer a contrasting analogy to the still life she witnessed in the ghetto? (Bryson, 1990, p. 98) Recall, for example, the Dutch painter Willem Claesz Heda (1594–1682), who painted tables in disarray, tipped-over goblets, half-drunk glasses of wine, silver trays, pewter pots, pieces of bread and fruit, and other leftovers from wealthy feasts, displayed on rumpled tablecloths, scenes that art historian Norman Bryson (1990) calls “a still life of disorder.” These scenes communicate a sense of the fragility of human life (Bryson, 1990, p. 132). The displaced and consumed material objects reflect the ethical impoverishment of the household (Bryson, 1990, p. 122). “The table,” writes Bryson (1990), “is like a bank-vault—or a graveyard”; he continues:

Though worth thousands of guilders, the heaped up objects look like so much junk: the treasure-house is where objects come to die. Divorced from use, things revert to absurdity, anticipating nothing from human attention, they seem to have dispensed with human attention, whose purpose and even existence they come to challenge. (p. 128)

Though Auerbach seems to find some similarity between the piles of discarded objects in the streets of the Warsaw ghetto and the painted scenes of disorder, there is in her view something different and completely aberrant in the ghetto's particular variation on the theme of still life. As her account shows, the ghetto still life requires a special mode of listening. Jewish things do not simply belong to the visual field; they appear as speaking objects. Auerbach's (1954) account makes room (or provides a platform) for the testimony of Jewish things, including those found in piles of garbage: unlike the used-up objects at the end of a feast, here still life begins to testify, inverting the apparent premise of the genre, giving objects voices:

In the picture of the Jewish genocide, the destruction of things takes a very prominent place . . . Oh, these natures mortes, these still lives of the dying ghetto, wet with the last sweat, buried in the dirt of the last vomit and feces of death. To understand what had happened, it was enough to look at the piles of rubbish that grew in the yards during the deportation *Aktionen*. One needed nothing more. (p. 133, emphasis added)

The reference to still life helps Auerbach bring out a major change in life under Nazi occupation, concerning a re-evaluation of the comparative value of people and things. Material goods have become more valuable than human beings. She recounts a recurrent phenomenon of impoverished, once well-to-do families, who had become beggars; they would sit together in the street, displaying an old family photo from better times and reenact its exact poses. The tableau vivant, the silent human scene and the old family photo produce a painful contrast of present and past. The contrast "speaks for itself." Auerbach (1954) writes:

These photos, now thrown on piles of garbage without any purpose or intention, screamed into the void. They gave strong emphasis to the strange language of the garbage left after the Jews' departure. They were the melodramatic exclamation mark, the most vivid component of the countless examples of still life that were painting themselves on the black canvases of the deportation. (p. 137, our translation)

Auerbach refers here to the reistic testimony of things ("painting themselves" or speaking for themselves) thus offering a critical intervention in the meaning of "objectivity" or "objective evidence." It is as if she expects things to give objective testimony that will be beyond dispute or interpretation.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Sunt Lacrimae Rerum*

A poetic motto prefaces Auerbach's "The Weeping of Dead Things." It is Virgil's *sunt lacrimae rerum* (Virgil's *Aeneid*, 1.462).<sup>38</sup> It is the famous response uttered by Aeneas, the Trojan survivor, in front of a wall painting portraying the Trojan war in Carthage at the temple of Juno. Auerbach's allusion to Virgil's epic makes an association between the Jewish ghetto and the myth of the sack of Troy. As Aeneas reaches the safe shores of Carthage after escaping the burning Troy along with a small group of others, he is surprised to encounter his own past experience depicted in murals in this foreign country. The *pictura inanis* (empty, lifeless picture) brings back traumatic memories of the war in Troy. The picture is a painful reminder of a lost world. The evocative scenes of the battlefield powerfully convey for him, the involved viewer, the ruin of his homeland and the death of his beloved. It is this image of the defeated Troy that provides a mythic paradigm for the destruction of the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. Auerbach's allusion to this Virgilian episode of spectatorship evokes Aeneas's empathic gaze and reproduces the emotional effect of a lifeless picture on the survivor-viewer.

Many interpreters of this passage have struggled to decipher the meaning of Aeneas's words, finding the Latin phrase difficult and ambiguous.<sup>39</sup> How, for example, are we to understand the relation between *lacrimae* and *res*: are they tears for what happened? Do they express the world's empathic response

to the Trojan war? Whereas the Virgilian *res* clearly refers to immaterial things, events or affairs, Auerbach reads it literally: the objects shed tears.

Auerbach's (1954) wish to heed Jewish things should be read against the programmatic preface to her book where she writes:

The mass murder, the murder of millions of Jews by the Germans, is a fact that speaks for itself. It is very dangerous to add to this subject interpretations or analyses. Anything that is said can quickly turn into hopeless hysteria or endless sobs. So one must approach this subject with the greatest caution, in a restrained and factual manner. (p. 7; translation from Kassow, 2015, p. 497)

This is where we may find an explanation for why Auerbach prefers the testimony of everyday objects. Turning to silent objects as witnesses protects us from unrestrained emotion. And yet listening to the weeping of things has a cathartic effect, so that "the tears we hold inside with all our might when we think of the dead, flow like a bountiful autumn rain on the cemetery of dead things" (Auerbach, 1954, p. 133).<sup>40</sup> The deflection from humans to objects can overcome the human muteness of those who were eyewitnesses to the Holocaust, and allow the empathic listener to shed tears. In fact, Auerbach's writing turns the objects themselves into empathic listeners to the Jewish tragedy. In the ghetto, after the great deportation, it is the abandoned objects and not human beings who remain to cry over the fate of the Jews.

The law is not absent from Auerbach's essay, but she does not turn to the law of restitution, as is common today in relation to art looted by the Nazis. Like the poets, Ginczanka and Szlengel, Auerbach is interested in everyday things, but she goes even further and tries to write the history of the ghetto from the perspective of the garbage piles. The legal category resonating throughout her text is that of inheritance—what to do with the huge category of "heirless Jewish inheritance" created by Nazi crimes? Shifting perspective from human subjects to objects (and blurring the distinction between them) she writes about orphaned objects with nobody to take care of them. Looking

for a name for the new crime, Auerbach stresses that there was an indissoluble bond between the murder of European Jews and the looting of their property. Auerbach's understanding thus evokes the conceptualization of the crime of genocide by Lemkin—a category that encompasses systematic murder, looting, and cultural destruction (Bilsky & Klagsbrun, 2018; Bilsky, 2021). This understanding explains why she insists on blurring the boundaries between subjects and objects, between the fate of people and property. She contrasts German and Jewish law. The biblical admonition, “Would you murder and take possession?” (1 Kings 21:19) was inverted in those dark times, and German law turned the question mark into an exclamation. Auerbach (1954) writes:

according to the law the property of the Jews who were deported to the east passed in inheritance to their murderers. It is always important to remember that the mass murder of Jews was also mass murder for the purpose of robbery. (p. 134)

True to her phenomenological approach, Auerbach follows the change in language; even before legalized aryanization of Jewish property took effect, new occupations such as the *Szaber*—a person who loots the apartments of deported Jews—came into being.<sup>41</sup> As time passed, the new occupation developed subspecialties, and even Jews took part in it.<sup>42</sup> Auerbach (1954) contrasts criminal Nazi law with Jewish popular morality, which regards the fate of human beings as one with their possessions:

The clothes of dead people should not be sold or given as gifts to unworthy people. These clothes should be worn by sons and daughters, friends or the pious poor who are willing to accept them. By way of *tikkun* (making amends) of things, reparation to the deceased can proceed.<sup>43</sup> (p. 135)

Auerbach (1954) wonders whether the humanity of this Jewish ethics, which respects the everyday possessions of the dead, could at all be understood by “the ignorant German who murders living beings for greed and robbery” (p. 135). Against the

complete commodification of human beings, not stopping at the extraction of gold teeth from murdered Jews in German death camps, Auerbach posits a Jewish ethical approach toward objects. Endowing everyday objects with a voice and subjectivity becomes an act of ethical resistance.

## Conclusion

The testimony of everyday objects is crucial for presenting a new kind of testimony of the Holocaust. Ginczanka, Szlengel, and Auerbach write on the fate of everyday things and make them their witnesses. The legal institution of inheritance allows them to imagine justice after their deaths, using the form of poetic testament. Their texts are written as a legal indictment in disguise against those who betrayed them. The objects once owned by the Jews function as silent material witnesses testifying to the close connection between property crimes and genocide. These authors choose to write on the fate of everyday things and make them their witnesses. They refrain from discussing murder and brutal violence directly, and they do not focus on looting rare works of art and other precious and religious objects. Instead of trying to receive restitution as a measure of justice, Ginczanka, Szlengel, and Auerbach turn to objects in order to reconstitute their stories and experiences. This type of testimony is unique since it is delivered within the confines of the traumatic event, written from within the destruction while it is still happening. It is this type of witnessing that ties the present to the future, or as Paul Celan put it, sends a message in a bottle to the future.

## Notes

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2. *La Voix Humaine* by J. Cocteau was published in 1928 and premiered in 1930. On the arrival of the telephonic voice in theater, opera, and film, see Friedlander (2005, pp. 113–130).
3. “There was no longer an other to whom one could say ‘thou’” (Laub & Auerhahn, 1989, p. 81).

4. Julian Tuwim (1894–1953), a Polish Jew, is considered one of the greatest modern Polish poets.
5. Lvov is the Polish name of the city that was part of Poland before 1939. Today the city is in Ukraine and is called Lviv. We use “Lvov” whenever we quote or refer to the historical sources that used this name.
6. For further discussion of this trial, see the next section.
7. See I. Grudzińska-Gross, A. Pramik, and G. Cebula (Trans.) in *Little Star*, 3(2012), p. 188.
8. On the silenced voice of the mythological weaver, see Lev Kenaan (2001).
9. According to Jerzy Tomczak’s memoirs, Ginczanka and her friend Blumka Fradys later escaped Lvov and were hiding in Kraków in the fall of 1944 in an apartment on Miłkołajewska Street, where they were arrested. They died in the fall or winter of 1944 in the Plaszow camp (see Haska, 2010, p. 318, n. 15).
10. For an article on the case reproducing legal materials from the files in the State Archive in Warsaw in English translation, see Haska (2010).
11. See Kornbluth (2021, pp. 221–225) and Gross and Grudzinska Gross (2016, p. 51). Reviewing about 250 August trials cases from the Kielce area, Gross and Grudzinska Gross conclude that “this is a body of evidence from which Jewish voices are almost entirely absent. These were not cases brought by Jews. The Jews who appear in these depositions had been killed. And there were no Jewish witnesses left to testify about the murders.” But, note that the Jewish victims had Jewish advocates in the Central Jewish Historical Commission and its successor, the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which provided prosecutors with documentary evidence and statements collected by survivors (see Finder & Prusin, 2018).
12. See also Gross and Grudzinska Gross (2016), who quote from a diary by Dr. Zygmunt Klukowski from October 1942: “The population grabs from opened Jewish houses anything they can get hold of. People shamelessly carry big bundles with pitiful Jewish belongings or merchandise from small Jewish shops” (p. 43).
13. The oldest poetic testament was Horace’s “Non Omnis Moriar.” “My Testament,” by the Polish Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki, was written in Paris around 1839 and is considered one of his great achievements. Jacek Leociak (2015) writes on Słowacki’s influence on Ginczanka’s testament poem: “Zuzanna Ginczanka [in ‘Non Omnis Moriar’], undoubtedly one of the darkest Polish poems, invokes the great Horacean tradition and Juliusz Słowacki’s masterpiece of Polish Romanticism in order to make her devastating charge. In the style of a perverse persiflage, using language full of sarcasm and expressive mockery, he gives us from beyond the grave, as it were, his terrible testament of disinheritance, rejection, disgrace and terrifying loneliness. Ginczanka does not have even the smallest circle of friends who could—as with Słowacki—gather at night, burn the poet’s heart wrapped in aloe and give the powder to her mother. Only spies, informers and denunciators were interested in her” (p. 527). We thank Olga Kartashova for her translation from the Polish.
14. Note, however, that according to Kornbluth (2021, p. 126), the August decree and trials allowed for many procedural irregularities, such as the lack of appeals, permission for indirect evidence, lay judges, and so on. This was due to their provisional character, the need to satisfy society and head off vigilantism, and the realization that the mass criminality could not be adapted to the framework of existing legal norms.
15. Gross and Grudzinska Gross (2016) explain that this problem was typical of many August cases: “Much of the evidence about killings or denunciations of Jews . . . consists of uncorroborated personal testimony from survivors, their relatives, or acquaintances. Typically, this testimony is brief and notes just the facts. Much of the time it is secondhand information” (p. 58).
16. Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” plays on the inherent tension in law between the universal and the particular. The man from the village comes to the law expecting universal justice, and spends his lifetime waiting for it: the gate meant

only for him closes just as he realizes this. Similarly, the Jews could expect that the universal language of law would bring them belated justice; however, they were most skeptical of finding justice in the August trials. Indeed, as Kornbluth (2021) shows, the court rewrote the historical narrative of the war in ways that silenced the Jews and distorted their experiences.

17. The English translation of this passage is from Kassow (2009, p. 317).
18. Szlengel was killed or committed suicide in April 1943 during the ghetto revolt. The circumstances of his death are not clear (see Kassow, 2009).
19. For the history of Oyneg Shabes, see Kassow (2009).
20. One part of the archive was found on September 18, 1946, and the second part, including Szlengel's poems, was found in December 1950 (Kassow, 2009, p. 215).
21. From Birenbaum's introduction to *What I Read* (Szlengel, 1943/1987, p. 9; our translation to English).
22. The first publication of Szlengel's poems was in Poland in 1947. It included 14 poems and two introductions dedicated to the dead and to the Polish reader. Another publication appeared in 1977 on the 35th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising (Szlengel, 1977).
23. Translated by Mark Joseph from the Hebrew translation by Shmuel Shaps, Sefrut Polanin be levush Ivry.
24. Emmanuel Ringelblum (1974) writes: "The Jews were treated as 'deceased on leave' about to die sooner or later . . . in an overwhelming majority of cases, perhaps 95 percent, neither goods nor personal belongings were returned" (pp. 77–78). This is also cited in Gross and Grudzinska Gross (2016, p. 81).
25. "Note to the Pedantic Reader" in Szlengel (1943/1987, p. 26). In another introduction, "To the Polish Reader," Szlengel (1943/1987) adds that "readers will have to understand the complete lack of hope, and one-sidedness of the love [of Jews for Polish culture] in order to forgive the unpleasant sounds which the Polish reader might hear in 'Things,' 'Window to the Other Side' or the accusation in the poem 'The Key Is with the Concierge'" (p. 27, our English translation).
26. Kassow (2009, p. 317) writes that the poem reads like a bill of lading.
27. Translated from the Polish by John and Bogdana Carpenter in Roskies (2019, pp. 214–218).
28. Interestingly, in Polish jargon, the allegedly neutral phrase "post-Jewish" refers to Jewish apartments and property acquired by locals in Poland. This is not, though, a legal term defining ownership, but a factual term masking the role of Polish agency (see Gross & Grudzinska Gross, 2016, p. 29).
29. The universal meaning of the idiom *veritas omnia vincit*, truth defeats everything, undergoes a shift in, coming to mean that it is the truth of the defeated—the victim's truth—that prevails.
30. "Things" in Roskies (2019).
31. We should note that both "Things" and "Non Omnis Moriar" became the witnesses of their authors through the discovery of the poems as material objects. In the case of Szlengel, "Things" was discovered in a small town near Warsaw in the 1960s. The poem, together with others by Szlengel, was found inside the drawer of a discarded table by a Pole chopping the table up for firewood. Thus, some restitution was made as both Szlengel's and Ginczanka's poems were saved from anonymity and destruction.
32. The text is based on notes from Auerbach's diaries during 1942 in the Warsaw ghetto; they are included in her 1954 book *In the Streets of Warsaw (Be-Hutzot Varsha)*.
33. From July 22 to September 24, 1942, more than 250,000 people were sent to Treblinka.
34. For the distinction between visibility and visuality, see Kenaan (2020, pp. 18–20).
35. In Polish, "still life" is *martwa natura*, literally "dead nature," and comes from the French term *nature morte*.
36. Auerbach was influenced by Emanuel Ringelblum, a historian with Marxist leanings. His Oyneg Shabes documentation project was modeled on the YIVO Col-



- lection, which began in Vilna in the 1920s, and was based on the memories and observations of ordinary people rather than focusing on the Jewish intelligentsia (Kassow, 2019, p. 75).
37. Auerbach's (1954) text offers word play on the rule of evidence, *Res ipsa loquitur* ("the thing speaks for itself"), a legal doctrine according to which a court in a tort or civil lawsuit can infer negligence from the very nature of an accident or injury in the absence of direct evidence on how any defendant behaved. Auerbach gives a literal meaning to this rule, expecting abandoned Jewish things to offer perfect testimony to the Holocaust.
  38. Auerbach's essay is a combination of two texts originally published in Polish in the Polish-Jewish newspaper *Przełom* that were titled "Lament of Dead things" (1943, publ. 1946) and "Lacrimae rerum" (1943, publ. 1949).
  39. For a survey of the multiple interpretations of Virgil's *Aeneid* (1.462) and an analysis, see Wharton (2008).
  40. Compare this with Elie Wiesel, who ends the Yiddish version of his autobiographical novel, *Un di velt hot geshvign* (*And the World Remain Silent*), with his experience in Buchenwald with the following words: "[At daybreak] we found Julie dead. His shattered violin, which everyone had trampled underfoot, was a desecrated corpse in a breached cemetery. And I don't know why: the broken little violin stirred greater grief than the dead Julie" (translated in *Haaretz*, August 5, 2021).
  41. The word "Szaber" perhaps comes from "shaving" apartments. Gross and Grudzinska Gross (2016, p. 29) explain that the war left its mark in a specialized vocabulary in Polish: *szmalcownik* (someone blackmailing Jews for money), *szaber* (appropriation of "post Jewish" [*pozydowska*] or "post German" [*poniemiecka*] property).
  42. After the great deportation, the collection of objects from apartments became systematic. Separate groups of Jewish workers collected glass and china, chandeliers, clothes and personal underwear, paintings and light furniture, heavy furniture. The objects were moved to offices for the private use of German civilians (see Gross & Grudzinska Gross, 2016, p. 88). Auerbach (1954) explains that Jews too took part in this pillage, commenting that maybe it was for the best, instead of leaving everything to the Germans; better that Jews become the inheritors of Jewish property.
  43. Auerbach relies on the Jewish ethical concept of *tikun olam*.

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