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Domestic Listening Across Generations: Irene Oore's *The Listener: In the Shadow of the Holocaust*

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, critical interest in the effects of institutional and technical protocols on recorded Holocaust testimony has grown. The role of professional or volunteer adult interviewers has been re-examined, particularly in relation to taped, archival testimony, and studies demonstrate that survivor testimony is shaped by the interview situation and listening practices. However, the role of the child listener in a domestic setting in relation to postmemory autobiography and memoir has received less attention. In the analysis that follows, I focus on Irene Oore's 2019 memoir, *The Listener: In the Shadow of the Holocaust*, because, as the title suggests, Oore thematizes the question of listening, asking what it means to listen to a survivor parent. My analysis considers domestic listening in relation to Holocaust testimony as well as to listening as emotion work. Oore's text posits life writing as the most desirable outcome of domestic listening, for it can be an act of care which elicits the retelling of witness accounts. In publishing her mother's stories, as well as her own experiences of listening to them, Oore's postmemory writing functions as deferred and mediated testimony which her mother never publicly gave.

KEYWORDS

Testimony; witnessing; postmemory; mothers; daughters; emotion work

Listening in postmemory life writing

The concept of testimony has been central to our understandings of Holocaust history and memory, at least since the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961.¹ After years of silence and silencing, survivor witnesses spoke out at the trial about Nazi atrocities, and their testimonies entered into the legal and historical record. Subsequent interest in the Holocaust led to the establishment of archives of recorded and videotaped accounts of survivors as well as to the development of a critical discourse concerning testimony.² In this discourse, listening has played an important role. Initially influenced by psychoanalysis, the role of listener, interviewer, or 'secondary witness' has been viewed as key to eliciting survivor testimony, conceived as contributing both to the survivor's working through of trauma and to the wider consolidation of first-hand knowledge of the suffering, atrocities, and genocidal programme perpetrated by Nazi Germany.³

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In contrast to the adult listener of testimony who listens in a professional, semi-professional, or public capacity is what I call the domestic listener, a child or young person who has listened to stories of the Holocaust in the intimate setting of the home, told over a lifetime by a survivor to whom the listener is closely related. Unlike interviewers who, as adult professionals or trained volunteers, deliberately and willingly elicit narratives from survivors, listeners who are children of survivors tend to have heard survivor accounts in their home as children or young people, sometimes over a long time. Indeed, one of the earliest collections of voices of children of survivors—Helen Epstein’s *Children of the Holocaust*—provides various accounts of hearing about the Holocaust and parental survival in a domestic context. In autobiographies and family memoirs written as adults, children of survivors such as Anca Vlasopolos (2000) describe how parental accounts unfolded piecemeal over a lifetime, while others, like Helen Fremont (1999), describe life-long silence and secrecy. Still others, such as Lisa Appignanesi (1999), Lena Einhorn (2005), or Anne Karpf (1996), make deliberate efforts to record their parents’ stories through interviews or to return to the country of their parents’ birth, frequently in cases of impending parental decline into dementia or death. In postmemorial writing, the struggle of children of survivors to process parental suffering and its significance for their own lives takes place within an intimate family relation and, I suggest, it can be understood as a form of ‘emotion work,’ a concept developed to make visible and recognise the effort of maintaining relationships and managing one’s own emotions as well as those of others, usually within the family (Erickson 2005).

Children of survivors—members of what Marianne Hirsch terms the postmemory generation—have written about a variety of emotional and psychological difficulties associated with the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust memories. Indeed, affect is the core component of Hirsch’s definition of postmemory, for the second generation ‘remembers’ through ‘stories, images, and behaviors’ from their lives with parents, but ‘these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right’ (2012, 5). Postmemory writing and the critical material that grew in response to it from the 1980s on thus emphasise not just the transmission of memory, but also the intergenerational transmission of trauma.⁴ Such transmission has been conceptualised as occurring indirectly through strained silence, emotional outbursts or severe emotional restraint, and involuntary corporeal responses of the survivor to various situations. Hirsch’s theory of postmemory, as she observes (2012, 34–36), draws force from the intimacy and language of family, domesticity, and the position of the child. Even her broad, generational category of affiliative postmemory—a counterpart to familial postmemory—‘makes [the survivors’] child’s position more broadly available to other contemporaries’ (2012, 36). Like other scholarship concerning Holocaust history, Hirsch’s theory of familial and affiliative transmission is urgently concerned with cultivating not just empirical knowledge about an historical event, but also a deeply felt and ethical response to the horrors, suffering, and immorality of the Nazi regime—understood to grow in importance as the number of survivors wanes.

Postmemory works such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (2003) or Anne Karpf’s *The War After* (1996) recount the psychological challenges of growing up as a child of survivors. They tell of living with parental depression and suicide, parental over-protection, anxious concern with eating habits or keeping warm, silent distress in relation to questions about the family past, or strong emotional investments in their children’s lives. Some texts

simultaneously attest to the authors' love and admiration for their parents, to strong family ties, and to their parent's love and support for their children. Some explicitly challenge what they see as a pathologizing view of Holocaust parenthood.⁵

Irene Oore's *The Listener*, from 2019, displays an acute ambivalence about post-Holocaust family life and parent – child relations, but it is unusual in its account of exposure to explicit accounts of maternal vulnerability and survival from an early age.⁶ The heaviest burden Oore claims to experience as a child is the one of listening. She is expected from a young age to listen to her mother Stefa's narratives about surviving in Nazi-occupied Poland. Along with her sister Flora, Stefa survived first in Lodz, then in the Warsaw ghetto, and later by passing as a Christian Pole or hiding out, frequently on the run or in danger of exposure, capture, and murder. Her stories, writes Oore, were 'about bombs and terror, about Nazi and Ukrainian soldiers, about Jews and Poles and shelters and fear. ... Shame, humiliation, and hunger stories' (19). *The Listener* presents these stories, as well as Oore's recollections of hearing them at different junctures in her life.

Though Oore begins listening from a young age, she records her mother's stories quite late, as she becomes aware that Stefa's physical and mental health are in decline. When Stefa is in her late 80s, the two engage in a project of telling and listening. For weeks, Oore visits Stefa in her apartment and transcribes her speech, listening to her mother's Polish and translating into English: 'her story and mine: inextricably entangled. We sat beside each other. She talked, and I listened and wrote ...' (35). *The Listener* recreates this dialogic process by enclosing Stefa's stories in quotation marks, a strategy of separation and inclusion. Oore's observation that she hears her mother's voice from within describes the formal composition of *The Listener* as well as the mother-daughter/speaker-listener dynamic: 'The two voices, hers and mine, combine, echo one another, sometimes struggle and separate, only to combine once again. Inextricable yet distinct voices: hers and mine' (26). This dynamic strongly affects the author's capacity for listening and, ultimately, for writing. In relaying her mother's stories, as well as her experiences of listening to them while growing up, Oore's published memoir can be said to function as a mediated and deferred form of witnessing to the testimony which Stefa never publicly gave. Such belated accounts may offer important contributions to our understandings of the Holocaust and its aftermath, as survivors pass and as children of survivors reach considerable ages.

After a brief examination of the act of listening in Holocaust testimony, including an account of listening as emotion work, I analyse Oore's text, attending to the role of the child domestic listener in the transmission of Holocaust testimony and to how Oore negotiates and transforms that role through life writing as an adult. The split autobiographical subject of the text is both the child listener and the adult woman listener and writer. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2019) argue, autobiography does not offer a coherent self, but multiple selves: 'acts of autobiographical narration may shuttle between the experiences of an "I-now" and the histories of its "I-then" at multiple points in time; and such shuttling and breaching may expose strange and uncanny disjunctions' (9). In my analysis, these subject positions are distinguished from one another by referring to the adult, autobiographical narrator as Oore and the autobiographical child protagonist as Irene, though this neat division disguises the multiple, overlapping identity positions in the work.

Testimony and the caring listener

Oore's exploration of listening to stories of Holocaust experience in a domestic setting can be placed in the broader context of theorizations of listening to Holocaust testimony.⁷ Almost from their inception, Holocaust Studies have attended to the listener's role in eliciting witness testimony. In psychiatrist/survivor Dori Laub's (1992) classic work on 'the vicissitudes of listening' to Holocaust testimony at what became the Fortunoff Archive at Yale, the listener's role is indispensable: 'For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other*—in the position of one who hears' (70). Without an attentive listener, the testimony may 'end up in silence, in complete withholding' (71). In line with the professional ethics and practice of psychoanalysis, Laub clearly conceptualises listening as an active practice of empathy, upon which witness testimony, with all its potential for working through trauma, is dependent.⁸

Over the last decades a strong awareness of how testimony is elicited and shaped in interactions with listeners has emerged, confirming the importance of listening and specifying that listeners maintain a position vis à vis the witness which is at once ethical and empathetic. Lisbeth Lipari (2009) grounds ethical philosophy in the practice of listening. Henry Greenspan, whose listening practices are influenced by his training as a psychologist, insists on the importance of recurrent interviews, attending to body language, breaks in speech and repetitions, and of listening to the entire life stories of survivors (2010, xiii; 1–7). Hirsch distinguishes between appropriative and nonappropriative forms of identification with a witness (2012, 161). Conceding the importance of listeners, historian Thomas Trezise endorses respectful identification with a witness which 'fosters an empathy tempered by the awareness of an irreducible difference ...' (2008, 29). Caroline Wake argues that emotional copresence and empathy as well as 'self-presence' (2013, 116) on the part of the listener or secondary witness can ensure ethical witnessing and the effective transmission of testimony to tertiary witnesses (2013, 123).⁹ Steffi de Jong insists that a public forum and postmemory audiences are necessary to the (museal) transformation of a 'witness to the past' into a 'witness of history' (2018, 38). The meaning of empathy and the importance ascribed to it in secondary or tertiary witnessing has been interrogated by Silke Arnold-de Simine (2013, 42–43; 203), but she agrees that ethics and affect are important aspects of witnessing testimony.

Moving away from a model of individual speaking and listening, Noah Shenker's *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* offers an extensive analysis of the effects of listening practices and institutional protocols on taped survivor testimony in three major US archives.¹⁰ Shenker insists that 'institutional practices constitute voices of testimonial co-authorship that act in conversation with those of interviewers and witnesses' (2015, 151). Though critical of the strong focus on 'the dyadic, psychoanalytical dynamic of testimonial production' (2015, 197), he argues that 'the relational encounter between interviewer and interviewee nonetheless provides a potential foundation for fostering critically reflective, nonappropriative encounters with the suffering of others' (2015, 197).¹¹ Shenker's analysis is undertaken with the aim of fostering 'testimonial literacy' which he defines as 'an eye and ear for sensing the layers, ruptures, and tensions that mark the processes of giving and receiving accounts of the Shoah' (2015, 2), including spontaneous words, interactions, and physical movements occurring off camera, between takes, or unrecorded in the

transcripts of interviews. Throughout his analysis, he emphasises testimony as labour involving many individuals working in an institutional setting.

In these accounts, listening is conceptualised primarily as a voluntary, deliberate act, directed toward gaining and documenting knowledge about first-hand experiences of persecution and genocide under Nazi rule, and not infrequently undertaken with the understanding that listening to testimony might enable survivors to work through trauma. The listener thus strives for a position of empathy with the speaker, even when following a proscribed interview protocol.¹² Simultaneously, in eliciting memories and testimony from a primary witness, the listener maintains a ‘public’ role, for witness accounts are usually meant to contribute to public understanding about the historical events and psychosocial effects of Nazi Germany’s genocidal programme. Listeners—at least effective or ‘good’ listeners—elicit public testimony and can function as agents of the expansion and development of cultural memory and public discourse on the Holocaust.¹³

In these models, moreover, the listener is conceptualised as an adult, and as being on terms of at least relative equality with the witness. The power dynamics of speaking and listening are subordinate to the joint undertaking of testimony, for listening is infused with empathy and care. Yet listening, defined as ‘the ability to effectively attend to, interpret, and respond to verbal and nonverbal messages’ (Jones 2011, 86), is a cultural practice and communicative act, and therefore inevitably implicated in power dynamics: ‘Like any other cultural practice, listening is embedded in the complex realities of unequal power relations, cultural specificities and the dynamics of continuity and change’ (Lacey 2013, 22). Broader understandings of listening remind us that the role of listener is generally associated with silence, and frequently coded feminine, corresponding to ideas about passivity and receptivity, but also with care.

The concept of ‘emotion work,’ developed by Rebecca J. Erickson (2005) and others interested in gender, labour, and family, is one that overlaps with and can include listening. Erickson writes: ‘Offering encouragement, showing your appreciation, listening closely to what someone has to say, and expressing empathy with another person’s feelings ... –day after day, year after year—represent emotion work of the highest order’ (339). As Elizabeth S. Parks and Kristen Barta argue, the role of listener is indeed closely associated with emotion work and female gendered relational roles, such as sister or mother (2018, 30). This is confirmed by Kristine Alexander, who emphasises the family as an arena where age- and gender-based power relations combine to place a burden on daughters: ‘The ... emotion work expected of modern young people, which often includes demonstrating love and producing happiness in others, consistently places more pressure on girls than on boys’ (2013, 125). Emotion work as a form of unpaid and unrecognised labour is frequently carried out in domestic contexts: ‘As good listeners are framed as feminine family members, they also gain the implicit responsibility to enact that listening role as it becomes socially expected’ (Parks and Barta 2018, 40). ‘Supportive listening’ is one form of listening which requires the listener to ‘demonstrate emotional involvement and attunement while attending to, interpreting, and responding to the emotions of the support seeker,’ a task which is ‘complex and challenging,’ not least because, like all forms of listening, it involves so much more than simply hearing (Jones 2011, 86). In Oore’s postmemory writing, listening to maternal stories of Holocaust survival in the domestic context is represented as particularly complex and challenging for a child.

Domestic listening in childhood

The Listener shows that for children of survivors, domestic listening in childhood may differ considerably from the listening practices of adults trained to interview Holocaust survivors. Key features of the latter such as empathy, ethical recognition of difference, and voluntariness are absent or complicated in the child Irene, who, as noted, is exposed to her mother's accounts from the age of four. The author is raised on these accounts, which she comes to consider an ambiguous 'gift' combining life and death and the maternal body: 'She gave me life. She then offered me death, a daily ration of it' (3).¹⁴ The everyday recounting of Stefa's experiences, this text suggests, holds the potential to both enrich and cause distress to the child listener.

Irene's listening certainly generates distress and anxiety, reminding us that while those who talk about distress or trauma may be helped by speaking, those who listen to it may feel worse (Lewis & Manusov 2009, 287). Research has attributed emotional distress in everyday listening in part to a sense of responsibility to relieve unhappiness (Lewis & Manusov 2009, 290; 296), which is clearly Irene's desire in *The Listener*. As Irene puts it, 'I wanted to unburden her. I wanted to take on her suffering' (19). Irene desires 'to absorb as much of [her mother's story] as I could. To lighten her burden' (24). The child's sense of responsibility increases her anxiety.

Domestic listening is here directly related to relieving maternal suffering, uneasily underscoring an expectation for the child to meet the psychological needs of an adult.¹⁵ Listening, daily, to maternal stories of suffering and survival in the domestic environment emerges in this memoir as a type of emotion work—an activity 'concerned with the enhancement of others' emotional well-being and with the provision of emotional support' (Erickson 2005, 338). While emotion work is strongly associated with and carried out by women, especially mothers, it is the child in Irene's household who is meant to provide this support through listening. *The Listener* emphasises Irene's feeling of responsibility for her mother's emotional state and her desire to alleviate her suffering, thus reversing the roles of mother and daughter.

Oore's text grapples with her resentment of having her childhood compromised by this role reversal: 'How could this otherwise apparently "normal" woman tell such horror stories to a child? Though, it seems to me she could not help but tell them. What choice did she have? What choice did I have?' (59). Oore constructs her mother as compulsively retelling traumatic events, downplaying Stefa's agency by suggesting that she answers to an historical and psychological imperative to testify, albeit to her own child. Yet, Irene's mother may be enacting a version of 'didactic motherhood' defined as 'a form of maternal care through which mothers explain past traumas to younger generations' (Cazan 2017, 158).¹⁶ Her 'cautionary tales' about hatred and 'systematic extermination' have an educational, moral purpose: 'This,' she would tell the child sitting in front of her, 'is what you and I carry inside us, this potential for hatred and murder. Jews and Poles, Austrians and Germans, and everyone else, all alike' (20). Repudiating the role of perpetrator by imaginatively sharing in her mother's despair, Irene feels that her suffering in doing so might 'compensate for not having lived through this hell myself. Obviously, it was not the same as having lived through it, I thought, but it was all I could do' (20). She experiences the dynamics of postmemorial listening and telling as a form of shared suffering through

identification, while also registering, unhappily, the difference between her mother and herself.

The Listener also emphasises the child Irene's strong sense of identification with Stefa. While the balance between empathy and respectful, nonappropriative distance can be both necessary and difficult for trained professionals to maintain, Oore's narrative suggests that the task is particularly difficult for a child listening to a parent. Mothers and daughters, moreover, may share a sense of connection or even identity based on their experiences of becoming female.¹⁷ In *The Listener*, Irene identifies strongly with her mother and repeatedly seeks to replicate her situation, behaviour, or suffering. For example, Stefa evaded deportation from the Warsaw Ghetto by hiding behind a wardrobe from which she witnessed horrendous scenes of persecution of women. As a child, Irene hides in a wardrobe from which she fearfully observes the family maid beset with delirium tremens or from which she awaits news of a neighbour's sudden death. Oore reflects: 'This tiny, dark wardrobe in my room where I discovered madness, violence, and death, was a type of hiding place replicating in a strange manner the madness and death my mother had experienced several years earlier while hiding, terrorised, in that space behind the wardrobe in the Ghetto' (64). This attempt to replicate, in a different register, her mother's war-time experiences signals the empathy but also the vulnerability of the child listener.

A more extreme form of identification in the memoir is Irene's replication of Stefa's identity as a survivor. Oore, referring to Stefa's loss of a newborn and a pregnancy, states she has 'never been a true only child; rather, I have been a middle child between two dead siblings' who were 'killed by the story' (23). The loss of family members, while resonating with the situation of European Jews and other persecuted groups as well as with Stefa's experience, allows Oore to obliquely position herself as a survivor—of her mother's 'death womb' (22) and of her mother's story. Identifying as a survivor—particularly a female survivor—holds out the promise of fully understanding her mother's experiences and, perhaps, of adequately and authentically bearing witness to the Holocaust in her mother's stead.

At the same time, Irene feels that her suffering is inadequate and her identification incomplete: 'I was sure that I was incapable of [speaking of her mother's Holocaust experiences]. That I had no right. That I had not suffered enough. That mine was merely ersatz suffering. It was a second-hand suffering. Hers, stoic and righteous, was the only real one. Her daily Holocaust gift to me' (18). In addition to this critical insight into the issue of authenticity and appropriation, Oore's text expresses inadequacy and guilt when confronted with the task of comprehending suffering. In 'Starvation'—one of three chapters dealing with extreme hunger—Stefa and her sister Flora sate their wartime hunger by telling each other stories of the feast of challah bread and hot chocolate each will make for the other when the war is over. The two girls exchange elaborate, sumptuous stories at night, before falling into a starved sleep. Stefa tells this tale of storytelling as a bedtime starvation story to Irene, replicating the scene but in inverted form and with a contradictory effect. While Stefa and Flora find consolation in telling stories about their imagined meals, Irene feels instead an 'immense hopelessness' and 'vast despair' as well as guilt over her 'full belly' when she hears the story (10). As in this example, her mother's accounts evoke her child's empathy but simultaneously thwart full identification with her mother.

The emotion work of domestic listening as a child sometimes becomes unbearable, and in spite of her desire to listen well, Irene resists the maternal narrative on occasion: 'I would not listen, blocking the words from penetrating my consciousness. ... I would plead with her to stop ...' (3–4). Outright resistance, however, is rare: '... I hardly ever dared ask her to please stop the telling, to please, please let me go to the safety of my doll corner, behind the cabinet, to please let me hide there quietly and sing soothing lullabies to the dolls, covering up with those tunes the harshness of the story which was echoing and reverberating in me, like an unwelcome guest' (5). The child's desire to soothe and care for her dolls is a clear projection of her own desire to be soothed and cared for, and her wish to overlay Stefa's harsh story, resonating inside her, with more soothing sounds captures the dilemma of the domestic listener.

In telling her stories to Irene, the author suggests, Stefa was 'satisfying a need in herself as well as what she considered her sacred duty. She was bearing witness' (19). Yet, Stefa's witnessing in the domestic space is paradoxically also a form of muteness, in the sense that her speech is not given over into the public discourse about the Holocaust but remains at home, told again and again to a child who originally understands herself to be charged with listening, silently performing the difficult emotion work of consoling the inconsolable.¹⁸ In de Jong's terms, Stefa remains a witness of the past and, as we will see, rejects one opportunity to become a witness of history. Moreover, as numerous theorists have demonstrated, testimony can be shaped by its context and can influence and be influenced by the listener. The mother's need to bear witness to the past within her domestic space positions her young daughter as an involuntary secondary witness—a demanding role more suited to an adult capable of empathetic, ethical listening.

Domestic listening in adulthood

The Listener shows that listening in adulthood carries an added imperative, of ensuring that unique Holocaust experiences are not lost to posterity. The postmemory generation thus shares the desire frequently put forward by survivors, to tell the world and never forget. Oore's adult sense of responsibility for her mother's story is similar to that of formal interviewers or secondary witnesses, and she begins to emulate professional listening practices. She emphasises, however, that her mother chose her rather than the trained interviewers at the Spielberg Foundation: 'She entrusted me with the story. She refused to tell it to the Spielberg Foundation people, she refused to tell it to *byle kto* (just anyone). I was not just anyone; I was her only daughter, the chosen one' (15). Stefa's choice suggests that she understood her Holocaust narratives to be intimate disclosures, more important to the private family context and her relationship to her daughter than to the public context of an historical archive. Yet it may also suggest that she entrusted her bilingual daughter to make her personal story available to more people, if only to Stefa's own grandchildren. Whatever reasons Stefa had, the responsibilities of adult listening for Oore become increasingly aligned with the responsibility of retelling through writing, suggesting that her coming-of-age as a member of the postmemory generation entail an acceptance of the role of secondary witness or deferred witness to history.

Oore deliberately elicits her mother's testimony for the first time when she is an adult, no longer living with her mother, and Stefa is in her 80s. Oore translates and transcribes:

‘She talked, and I listened and wrote. I hardly dared look at her. She was little and frail, and she was old’ (35). This scene of transmission between two adults, mothers both, differs considerably from the bedtime starvation stories Irene heard as a child. It registers some degree of shared agency and relative equality between listener and recounter, though the description, which replicates the aural aspect of psychoanalytic encounters, also registers the difference in their ages in terms of power, for her mother is ‘little and frail.’ Moreover, Oore does not begin writing her memoir until after her mother’s death, when she can no longer read it, indicating perhaps that Oore is aware of the text’s implicit criticism of her mother’s actions towards her as a child.¹⁹ She wonders rhetorically, for instance, ‘what kind of listening would have been appropriate for a child. I suppose *appropriate* is not the right word, and I wonder what is the right word or whether the right word even exists’ (24). Tensions relating to domestic listening in childhood remain in the adult listener.

The Listener implicitly contrasts what it means for children of survivors to listen to Holocaust testimony as young children and as adults. As an adult, Oore continues the emotion work of empathic listening, including her sense of responsibility for her mother’s well-being. For example, Oore describes her mother’s belated ‘confession’ of the guilty secret she had kept for over 60 years—that she had given a piece of bread meant for her mother Sonia to a young girl living in the house where Sonia was hidden. Assuring her mother that Sonia would not have lived any longer had she got the bread, Oore realises ‘I was now my mother’s mother’ (13), comforting and consoling a mother experiencing dementia and deep-seated guilt about one of her war-time actions. The inversion of mother-daughter roles in emotion work is more acceptable to Oore later in life, even if Oore remains ambivalent about their relationship.²⁰

Oore continues to express anxieties about listening and identification. For example, Stefa appears to possess a clear map of the Warsaw ghetto in her mind, whereas Oore does not: ‘I do not have this knowledge, and as I am listening to her I feel distressed by what separates us: what she saw and heard and experienced, and what I cannot. Ever’ (45). In another example, when Stefa tells Oore about the *Umschlagplats*, or collection point, in the ghetto, Oore writes: ‘She has told me all of this before. This time, however, I am taking notes. She is counting on me, reluctant as I am, to tell it one day. I feel crushed by the responsibility. I feel crushed by the story, entangled by her “reasonable” insanity, trapped and crushed’ (60). In this passage, any replication of the mother’s position among the victims crowded into the square and then crushed and trapped in trains is displaced into the metaphor of a ‘crushing’ responsibility to retell Stefa’s story. In other words, as she matures, Oore’s desire for identification with her mother becomes increasingly bound up with questions about responsible representation and writing. The metaphor marks both identification with and difference from the mother, and echoes Nancy K. Miller’s point about autobiography: ‘in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography’s story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves ...’ (2007, 544). Oore’s double-voiced text exemplifies this aspect of life writing.

Oore experiences the separation between her and her mother as a threat to narration. Writing of her mother’s courage and resourcefulness, she wonders: ‘How do I even attempt to imagine [her] terror—a gut-wrenching, visceral fear? Am I capable of recreating it? Why do I feel that I owe it to myself, that I owe it to my mother and to my aunt, to

recreate it, to somehow relive it?' (95). Passages such as these underscore Hirsch's point that the 'index of postmemory' is shaped 'more by affect, need, and desire as time and distance attenuate the links to authenticity and 'truth' (2012, 48). At the same time, the intensity of Oore's anxiety about representational issues paradoxically creates an authenticity effect. These emotions might thus serve as a warrant for her ability to not only listen empathetically but also to tell her mother's story.²¹

As the responsibilities of listening are gradually subsumed into the responsibility of retelling through writing, Oore listens increasingly for details and facts, chastising herself for failing to remember or document what she hears: 'I realize once again that I will never get it all. In my mind the Ghetto was still surrounded by a fence [rather than a wall]! No matter how much she tells me, no matter how many times, no matter how much of it I manage to absorb, never!' (50). *The Listener* thus provides a kind of anxious metacommentary on the vicissitudes of listening and the value of oral testimony to and memory of Holocaust history. Upon hearing how her mother, aunt, and grandmother lived in Warsaw for a year, in one room with her aunt's friend Hala and her family in another, Oore reflects: 'I never asked her how many rooms there were in the Wielka apartment. I never asked how it was to live there, all nine of them. All but three of them ... were going to die within the following two to three years' (41). This passage emphasises numbers and starkly contrasts the question about the number of rooms in the apartment with the statement that two thirds of the inhabitants were murdered. It gestures towards wider discussions about Holocaust memory and the roles of secondary witnesses, such as Laub's (1992) account of a survivor who spoke of four chimneys being blown up in the Auschwitz Uprising of 1944 when there was in fact just one. This discrepancy, and Laub's reporting of it, has generated sometimes difficult discussions of testimony and historical truth.²² Self-reflexive passages in Oore's memoir demonstrate her awareness of the ethical and practical difficulties for children of survivors who listen with an aim of 'remembering' and transmitting parental stories so they enter into family history and/or the public realm.

Despite Oore's interest in factual details, she is sometimes reluctant to ask for them, particularly as Stefa takes up gender-specific vulnerabilities and dangers in the interviews. In line with research suggesting that motherhood posed an added risk for women, Stefa describes the anguish of mothers who were not allowed to hide with their children in the secret rooms behind wardrobes because 'the children could cry and endanger all those hiding. Therefore, more women with children than men came down to the courtyards and left with the Germans' (61).²³ If their infant or child cried, the mother would have to cover its mouth, sometimes smothering the child (62). She also tells of Nazis killing infants before killing their mothers (62). These accounts of Nazi cruelty and horrendous situations for mothers add to the horror of Oore's listening, for Stefa, though not a mother at the time, also hid behind a wardrobe.

Research on women in the Holocaust has determined that women in ghettos, in hiding, or in open hiding ran risks of sexual exploitation and assault.²⁴ Jewish women in hiding or passing for Christian were extremely vulnerable, for 'they were surviving on the margins of society' and had extra-legal status (Waxman 2010, 124). Stefa's accounts confirm the precariousness of her situation. She describes, for instance, being blackmailed about passing for Christian and consequently forced to move continually about Warsaw, sleeping in 56 different places over a period of just over four months

(97). The need for temporary refuge renders her vulnerable to sexual predation, and later she is in real danger of rape from Russian soldiers, who accuse her of ‘sleeping’ with Germans (114–115).

Stefa’s accounts are characteristically abbreviated, sometimes using euphemistic language.²⁵ Nevertheless, they evoke difficult thoughts and emotions in her daughter. For instance, Stefa’s brief account of refusing to have sex with the man she worked for, a Jewish widower passing as Christian (98), is followed by Oore’s extensive reflection: ‘I wonder how many times my mother rejected such advances. She was a beautiful young woman. How many times she consented. What did she not tell me? And why did I feel that she owed me the whole truth? Was it implicit that I had to believe it all? Even though I was her ‘designated’ listener, this role she chose for me did not cancel the fact that she was my mother, that I was her daughter. Were the two roles compatible? Truly compatible?’ (98). In this quotation, where all the questions except the one about maternal consent to sexual bartering are rendered with question marks, Oore underscores the contradictions she experiences in the roles of listener and daughter. She implies that a listener should be able to maintain enough emotional distance to ask difficult questions and to hear difficult answers—even to subject those answers to objective scrutiny—while the daughter may instead be ruled by respect and decorum, even as an adult.

The mother, moreover, may well have chosen euphemistic language to spare her daughter, just as the narrative seems to indicate that she chose to talk about sexual victimisation only when Oore became an adult. Horowitz observes that some women survivors deferred writing or publishing their autobiographical accounts until many years afterwards, in part because ‘narratives about women’s sexual encounters often push against familial and community norms’ (2020, 48).²⁶ Stefa’s disclosures of matters concerning sexuality and gender nevertheless challenge Oore’s adult listening. In the case of a Jewish policeman who wished to marry Stefa, Oore wonders, ‘Did he know that she was married? Did she consider this marriage as a possibility? Did they have an affair? Why is she telling me this? And since she is telling me this, why is she not telling me more?’ (57). The choice of the word ‘affair’ is jarring, given the mother’s extreme vulnerability, and it marks Oore’s difficulty in thinking about her mother’s sexual agency. Responding to another account about receiving a key to a couple’s apartment in Warsaw, Oore is more critical: ‘This is too sketchy. Something is missing, the story is not complete; maybe after all these years my mother does not remember? Though her memory is formidable. Crushing. But maybe she really does not remember? I could certainly understand that. It would perhaps make her more vulnerable? I feel uneasy and unsettled’ (98). Oore’s uneasy attentiveness to the gaps and silences in her mother’s narrative appears to accompany an insight into her mother’s gendered vulnerability.

After several such disclosures of threats of sexual assault or coercion, Oore begins to accept herself in her role of adult listener. In response to yet another account of sexual coercion (101), Oore first questions her ability to do justice to her mother: ‘my listening is flawed, my memory unreliable, and being her daughter adds, I think, to the distortion’ (101–102). However, Oore’s self-recriminations soon alter into an affirmation of their stories: ‘This painful duet: her voice and mine, in Polish and in English, across continents and decades. Words and memories that cannot be suppressed, cannot be silenced, and I am slowly reconciling myself with her story, her biggest treasure with which she entrusts me. I am honoured. I am listening as well as I can. I am listening as if my life depends on

it. It does' (102). She then states that her mother explicitly wants her story to become a book (102). In this account, the outcome of Oore's listening is that Oore finds her voice as a lifewriter, and that her voice is intimately connected to yet distinct from that of her mother. The positive image of the duet defines the form of her auto/biographical memoir, interweaving but distinguishing her mother's voice from her own.

The final pages of *The Listener*, however, incorporate more voices. In the 'Postlude,' Oore asks her children to read the manuscript, 'for them to become her listeners and mine' (122). In keeping with the notion of 'didactic motherhood', Oore accepts the educative role her mother once took on, but repeats it with a difference: she 'invites' her own adult children to read her testimony, and makes clear that they are free to decline. Oore thus shows her understanding for how listening as reading is indeed difficult emotion work. The written responses of her children, incorporated into the published text of *The Listener*, confirm that understanding. They speak of love and their appreciation of Stefa's and Oore's strengths in dealing with difficult pasts, but they also speak of their own difficulties. At least one of the children, like Oore, experiences a 'crippling self-criticism' (126) and (possibly the same child) shows a similar need to imitate suffering by imitating, in private, Stefa's death cramps, which he or she had witnessed (127). The responses of the third generation indicate that Oore, unlike Stefa, had been careful not to burden her young children with fearful stories, but that some sense of fear was nevertheless transmitted. The intense emotion with which the children read the manuscript, at an even greater remove from events of the Holocaust, suggests that the story, 'transformed by its telling, will continue to live' (128) not only in Oore, but in her children and, analogously, in those who can read the published account. In publishing *The Listener*, Oore's painful domestic listening is fulfilled in writing, as she and her mother belatedly bear witness to the Holocaust and its aftermath.

Conclusion

As theorists from Laub to de Jong have observed, a witness requires a listener: 'Witnesses can only give testimony in front of an audience' (Jong 2018, 35). Unlike witnesses to the past, what de Jong calls 'witnesses to history' give verbal or written testimony to a past event in a public forum, and it is the postmemory generation that makes up the audience. While de Jong and others have theorised this audience as a public one, or as a blend of private and public, Oore's postmemorial life writing focuses instead on the situation of domestic listeners who experience and negotiate Holocaust recounting in an affective register, in childhood and beyond. The emotion work carried out is represented as partly debilitating but finally empowering to the domestic listener who writes.

Direct experience of historical events is generally considered an indispensable component of witnessing. Those who interview survivor witnesses are also frequently considered 'secondary witnesses,' due to their proximity to the survivor and to their empathetic listening practice. As de Jong observes, 'The secondary witness is ... not merely an active witness to the survivors' testimonies, in a way, she or he also becomes a second-generation witness to history. She or he gives testimony on the survivors' testimonies' (2018, 188). Greenspan also rhetorically asks who can retell Holocaust experience, answering: 'Any of us who allow ourselves, with survivors, to become participants in the effort; each in terms of the other; going as far as we can go' (2010, 15). There

are, however, ethical risks inherent in the concept of secondary witnessing, such as the extreme subjectivity pointed out by Trezise or the appropriation of a survivor identity. De Jong also notes that the concept ‘has the potential to evoke in the secondary witnesses the feeling that they are the direct inheritors of the survivors’ memories’; citing Jureit and Schneider, she writes that the concept can stand ‘for a generational strategy of self-accreditation’ (Jong 2018, 188).

While the affective dimensions of postmemory family life do tend to authenticate the experiences of both generations of witnesses, Oore’s narrative shows the difficulties of achieving empathy and becoming an ethical listener, both as a child and as an adult. It questions her own motives and memories, just as she questions her mother’s, incorporating human fallibility into her story. Moreover, *The Listener* implicitly challenges a hierarchy of witnessing by suggesting that the adult domestic listener has at least the potential to become a witness to history—to the Holocaust and to its second-generation effects. Stefa chooses to relate her experiences privately to her daughter, who listens first unwillingly, but later deliberately, bringing different modes of listening into her memoir. Oore’s final text serves as a witness to the histories of both survivor and child of a survivor. Through the emotion work of domestic listening, Oore’s polyvocal memoir transforms her mother from a witness to the past to a witness to history. This, indeed, is Oore’s gift to her mother, as well as her readers within and beyond her family.

Notes

1. See Shenker’s account of the Eichmann trial as the conceptual origin for modern Holocaust testimony (2015, 8). Greenspan also discusses early silencing of survivors and connects later interest in a US context with popular representations of Holocaust and other survivors; 1978 is the watershed year in his chronology (2010, 47; 60-63).
2. Writing in 2010, Greenspan observes that about ‘80 percent of the some 100,000 survivor accounts that we now have were produced since the early 1980s’ (x), and most are videotaped.
3. Arnold-de Simine (2013) attributes the term ‘secondary witness’ to Dominick Lacapra (42), and de Jong (2018) provides a critical account of the concept (187-190) while also noting the difficulty of tracing its origins (237 fn 1).
4. Arnold-de Simine (2013) discusses the critical vocabulary which has emerged to interrogate or describe the transmission of trauma, among them vicarious trauma or secondary trauma (35) and secondary witnessing (36-43). The intergenerational transmission of trauma has been increasingly explored in epigenetic terms, though evidence remains inconclusive. Intergenerational transmission of resilience has also been proposed; see, for example, Payne and Berle (2020) and Kidron, Kotliar, and Kirmayer (2019).
5. Anne Karpf (2008) provides an extensive overview of trends in psychological accounts of survivors and their children, concluding that ‘psychoanalysis does not emerge unblemished’ (237). She draws attention to ‘the often superabundant love [survivors] lavished on their children, which can’t be entirely dismissed as toxic or narcissistic’ (234). Epstein (1988) states unequivocally that she ‘disliked the way the psychiatric profession portrayed our parents’ (202).
6. In Helen Epstein’s (1988) groundbreaking work on children of survivors, very few individuals recount hearing stories from a very early age; most ‘had absorbed their parents’ attitudes toward Germany and the Holocaust experience through a kind of wordless osmosis’ (137). One exception is Al, who was overwhelmed by his parents’ relentless stories (226-227).

7. Work by major theorists in the 1980s and 90s such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), Cathy Caruth (1995), and Dominick LaCapra (1994) brought the juridical term ‘testimony’ to the context of psychoanalysis and literature, furthering the ideas of earlier psychoanalytic thinkers who saw restorative, healing potential in narrative. The testimony of survivors has thus frequently been cast as therapeutic: the survivor could be helped to overcome trauma through giving testimony to an empathic listener, whether that listener be a psychiatrist, or an interviewer trained in the art of listening. See Henry Greenspan et al. (2014) for a review of trauma and testimony as ‘foundational’ concepts.
8. As one critic puts it, referencing Erich Fromm: ‘Psychoanalytic practice is based on the art of listening ... It has invented the method of attentive listening, in which the psychoanalyst listens to the speaking subject in a setting that emphasizes the auditory sphere of communication and diminishes the visual ...’ (Välimäki 2015, 152).
9. See Kella (2018) for a discussion of Wake’s ideas about how transmission of memory can be affected in different ways when signs of remediation are highlighted or subsumed. Going on to examine tertiary witnessing, for instance, Wake (2013) argues that spatiotemporal copresence is not necessary to emotional copresence.
10. Shenker (2015) scrutinises the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, the University of Southern California’s Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive established by Steven Spielberg in 1994, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
11. Historian Thomas Trezise (2008) is also critical of the psychoanalytic model for survivor interviews because, in his view, they promote extreme subjectivity (20).
12. The Fortunoff Video Archive ascribes narrative control to the witness and a supporting role to the listener, though co-founder Laub’s writing (1992) makes clear that listeners have a strong role in eliciting testimony. The USC Shoah Foundation Archive, established in the wake of Spielberg’s popular, award-winning film adaptation of Thomas Keneally’s novel, *Schindler’s List* (1993), also developed a detailed interview methodology, focusing on historical accuracy but also emphasising the domestic settings in the homes of witnesses and narrative resolution. The Shoah Foundation has recently begun to honour the work of early interviewers such as Anne Bernard, who interviewed 102 survivors in 56 US cities. A webinar held in her honour in 2020 explains the recruitment of volunteers; many were psychologists, historians, and children of survivors. Training conditions for interviewers and listening protocols promote a complex relation of intimacy and distance, encouraging interviewers to respectfully bond with witnesses, in part in pre-interview sessions held in the homes of survivors, but also discouraging interviewers from offering comforting words or gestures in moments of distress (‘Focus’ 2020). See de Jong (2018, 58–70) and Schenker (2015) for sustained accounts of listening protocols. See also Rothberg and Stark (2003) and Skorczewski (2018) for critiques.
13. Critics have called attention to the blend of public and private in videotaped testimony. Wake observes: ‘Though the public and private are always in tension in any psychoanalytic encounter, being videotaped while testifying produces a particularly self-conscious sort of public privacy’ (2013, 117).
14. Death and life are united in story and the mother’s womb, a conceit that stems from the author’s knowledge that her birth in 1948 came two years after a stillborn brother and two years before another fetus is lost in the hysterectomy Stefa underwent to treat cancer.
15. See Claudia Nelson’s *Little Strangers* (2003) for an historical account of ideologies of childhood and the emotion work performed by children and orphans in the early 20th century.
16. For Cazan, didactic motherhood entails ‘narrative responsibility’ (2017, 158). The survivor Lydia in Greenspan’s work suggests that she may have told her children about horrible events before they were ‘old enough’ to hear, but she also chooses to do so to make ‘points’ about human behaviour (2010, 94–98). Her testimony is strongly mediated by her identity as a mother and is a good example of ‘didactic motherhood.’
17. Adrienne Rich’s ideas about matophilia and matophobia, for instance, emphasise daughterly ambivalence, affect, and intimate connection (1995, 218–255).

18. Horowitz analyses of the trope of muteness in Holocaust fiction, finding in it an ability to enact ‘a kind of muteness in the very midst of an ongoing narrative’ (1997, 39).
19. This is a second-generation counterpart to what Horowitz refers to as ‘deferred autobiographies’ of survivors who delay publication or writing until decades after events. She surmises the delay may have to do with, inter alia, ‘sensitive sexual revelations’ (2020, 46).
20. Oore’s (2019) burden of care for her mother manifests in a stark form when Stefa begins to have serious choking incidents connected with attempts to swallow. After speaking with her mother’s doctor and struggling to ‘wrap [her] mind’ around the situation, she finally advises her mother to stop eating. After Stefa in turn struggles ‘to wrap her demented and broken mind around her situation,’ she chooses death by starvation, ‘as her way to freedom from an unbearable life. Starvation finally became her ally’ (14).
21. Research into transmitted trauma by Kidron, Kotliar and Krimayer leads them to propose that ‘descendant valorization of the transmitted emotional scars of the parental-survivor past constitutes a context-particular form of “resilient vulnerability” ...’ (2019, 1).
22. See Laub’s (2009) response to Trezise (2008) critique of Laub’s early work with Felman. Laub argues for a psychoanalytic view of testimony, which recognises that the witness is testifying to a truth greater than the number of chimneys, that of the enormity of rebellion in a context of annihilation and despair. Without going into details, Trezise’s (2008) critique argues instead for a ‘credible objectivity’ (30) which, for the historian, involves a capacity for putting oneself in the position of another and, by virtue of so doing, acknowledging the relation between, and difference from, one’s self and the other. As noted before, it is this difficult position of identification combining empathy with ‘awareness of irreducible difference’ (29) which ensures an ethical attentiveness to witnessing and to historical fact.
23. Herzog observes, ‘In the Holocaust, the role and identity of motherhood involved fatal implications for women’ (2016, 19). Ringelheim (1985) and Duffy (2020) elaborate.
24. See, for example, Waxman (2010). See also Kaplan (2019) for an overview of gender and the Holocaust, and Katz (2012) for a discussion of rape and racial defilement in the Holocaust.
25. Kremer states that women survivors give less explicit accounts of sexual violence and predation (2010, 193). Some of the gaps and silences in Stefa’s narrative as well as her euphemisms may indicate a consideration for her daughter that Oore does not register.
26. Horowitz (2020) writes that accounts of women in their sixties or older may emerge when children or grown and husbands have passed or when the discourse admits of difficult topics that were earlier viewed as too dangerous or shameful. Comparing deferred accounts with early ones shows ‘how the extended postwar life refracts wartime memories’ (47).

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