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'I Searched for Words': Holocaust Survivor Poetry in Postwar Association Journals

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ABSTRACT

Extensive focus has been given to the development of a post-Holocaust genre of poetry, often by those who are not survivors of the Shoah. This article notes the distinction between Holocaust poetry (poems on the theme of the Holocaust) and poetry that is authored by Holocaust survivors and their families, a nuance that often goes unrecognized in the wider literature. This article foregrounds the importance of poetry as not just a testimonial device in these contexts, but a way to align the past with the present and to create a sense of wholeness and completion to an individual survivor's life while reflecting on challenges to that cohesion. This article utilizes poetry authored by survivors and their spouses from survivor association journals in the UK such as the '45 Aid Society and Association of Jewish Refugees to explore the value of personal reflection manifested in creative poetic expressions.

KEYWORDS

Holocaust; survivor; poetry; composure; postwar; Britain; survivor, poetry, composure

Note: All poems have been formatted in the same way as in the original journal articles.

Michael Etkind, a Polish Holocaust survivor from Łódź, wrote in 2017 that he 'searched for words' to convey the truth about the collective pasts of himself and fellow members of the '45 Aid Society.¹ This organization stemmed from the 1945 arrival in Britain of around 300 young concentration camp survivors from Theresienstadt following the British government's agreement to accept up to 1,000 unaccompanied child refugees. Although other groups later followed that first group, arriving throughout 1945 and into 1946, only 732 young people were brought to Britain in total. This reflects both the extremely low numbers of youth who survived the camps and differing priorities for choosing countries of emigration. Etkind's prolific compositions of poetry led to him being dubbed 'the society's poet' by late president of the society and historian Martin Gilbert, with Etkind's work regularly featuring in the yearly journal that circulated throughout the organization.² He consistently emphasized the difficulty in finding words to describe his experiences to those who did not share his past and

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¹Michael Etkind, 'I Searched for Words,' *Journal of the '45 Aid Society* (2017): p. 10.
²Ibid.

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lamented his struggle through the medium of poetry. Therefore, we can see here that language is often incapable of representing lived experiences, a key thread that this article examines.

This article thematically engages with key strands within survivor-authored poetry using a series of poems from the *Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) Journal* and the *Journal of the '45 Aid Society*. The *AJR Journal*, published monthly since 1946, includes a variety of articles; poetry is distinctively in the minority, and there is no regular pattern to the inclusion of poems, suggesting it is dependent upon submissions from individuals. Poems appear more frequently in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast, the *'45 Aid Society Journal*, through the encouragement of Michael Etkind, has a much more regular engagement with poetry. Published yearly since 1976, this journal features poetry in almost every issue. Using nine of the dozens of poems in these journals, this article examines the inadequacy of language in expressing a traumatic history and considers why survivors try and overcome this, and how they reflect on their present lives within their poetry through the lens of blame, guilt, and anxiety. This article also examines the phenomenon of survivor spouses writing poetry attempting to come to terms with a past they themselves did not experience but that remains ever present in their marital lives.

While there are many ways of analyzing poetry and much discussion as to the utility of poetry to a historian of society and culture, it must be emphasized that the power of poetry lies in its effect to 'stir something up in you' and to capture emotion that 'reaches beyond the shallow.'³ However, poetry has become a useful tool for the historian as a primary source, with a growing appreciation of the subjectivity of the poet and the poet's 'perception of his or her experience.'⁴ Jay Winter has examined the motivation for composing poetry in the context of World War I and highlights its place as 'a new language of truth-telling' about conflict and war, which can be observed in prose and the visual arts as well.⁵ He also emphasizes its power of expression, particularly in relation to the trauma of bereavement, which all Holocaust survivors experienced in the camps, ghettos, and in hiding.⁶ Julia Ribeiro has emphasized that 'the use of poetry as a historical source goes beyond the unveiling of personal experience' and 'must account for the act of choosing to enunciate in poetic form.'⁷ She has also highlighted the emphasis cultural history has given to poetry as a 'symbolic realm' of experience with particular application to wartime as it allows scholars to 'write a historiography based on representations, on the reframing of meaning, and on the reappropriation of symbols associated with a given event.'⁸ In this instance, the given event of the Holocaust has developed extensive prevalence and status in Western society, alongside evolving tropes and recurring representations that may divert from a Holocaust survivor's attainment of composure through poetry. Therefore, it is important to assess where Holocaust poems authored by survivors sit in a broader context of poetry, testimony, and trauma.

³Ivan Brady, 'Anthropological Poetics,' in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), p. 958.

⁴Julia Ribeiro, 'Knowing You Will Understand': The Usage of Poetry as a Historical Source about the Experience of the First World War,' *Alicante Journal of English Studies*, vol. 31 (2018): p. 118.

⁵Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 2.

⁶Ibid., p. 3.

⁷Ribeiro, 'Knowing You Will Understand,' p. 119.

⁸Ibid., p.118.

Composure has been defined by Graham Dawson as a way in which an individual will ‘find a way to talk about a difficult experience in order to avoid dealing with the emotions the recall might bring forth.’⁹ In addition to attaining composure through conversation, creative outputs such as art and writing become unspoken mediums of expression where composure can also be glimpsed. The strength of the poetic representation of Holocaust survivor poetry lies in its ‘limited, carefully chosen and well-crafted words,’ suggesting that the shorter medium of a poem allows for evocative messages to emerge to ‘evinced a vivid response from the reader.’¹⁰ Therefore, poetry provides short, succinct bursts of emotion to communicate quick and powerful messages about lived experiences of a traumatic nature.

Despite the perceived impossibility and barbarity of writing ‘poetry after Auschwitz,’ often invoking German philosopher Theodor Adorno’s infamous dictum, Holocaust survivors have and continue to create poetry about their experiences and trauma.¹¹ This is a sub-genre of ‘Holocaust poetry’ as a whole, as it focuses on the poets as the witnesses and equally the witnesses as poets. Arguably, there has become a necessity for ‘art to de-aestheticize itself and to justify henceforth its own existence’ in response to an ‘aesthetic principle of stylization,’ which removes the horrors of the unthinkable fates of Holocaust victims.¹² This urge for art to justify its existence is also reinforced by the implication of art in the Final Solution, as the Nazi regime manipulated art to serve their own ends.¹³

The questions that stem from such a broad statement as Adorno’s are twofold: the first considers whether any representations of the Holocaust itself are appropriate out of respect for the victims; the second is whether narration feels impossible due to the magnitude of such horror.¹⁴ Berel Lang made the bold claim in 2003 that all ‘figurative representations’ of genocide diminished a ‘moral understanding of it.’¹⁵ However, figurative representations such as poetry have value, leading James Hatley to convey valid concern about an approach such as Lang’s, highlighting, ‘In insisting that one’s writing about the Shoah become obsessively empirical and anti-figurative, Lang ignores the special role a prophetic use of figurative language assumes in registering traumatic events.’¹⁶ Therefore, we can mark poetry’s essence as the expression of experiences and memories, attempting to overcome the notion that poetry is impossible and language being inadequate to express these types of experiences.¹⁷ As a result, this article follows Hatley’s approach that figurative representations of the Holocaust are important and do not diminish our moral understanding of the Holocaust. Such an approach utilized in tandem with poetry authored by Holocaust survivors indicates the importance of

⁹Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 22.

¹⁰Frances Rapport, ‘The Poetry of Holocaust Survivor Testimony: Towards a New Performative Social Science,’ *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 9, no. 2 (May 2008), accessed 11 November 2019, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/405>.

¹¹Klaus Hofmann, ‘Poetry After Auschwitz: Adorno’s Dictum,’ *German Life and Letters*, vol. 58, no. 2 (March 2005): pp. 182–194, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230375035_Poetry_after_Auschwitz_-_Adorno's_Dictum.

¹²Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 32–33.

¹³Susan Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 4.

¹⁴Jerry Schuchalter, *Poetry and Truth: Variations on Holocaust Testimony* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 23.

¹⁵Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 150.

¹⁶James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 205.

¹⁷Daniel Dobbels, (ed.), *On Robert Antelme’s The Human Race* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), p. 34.

figurative exploration of the Holocaust by its witnesses as they express and cope with their trauma.

The significance of poetry against other forms of expressing a traumatic past such as memoir and speaking in public represents an important economic consideration. As Antony Rowland and Robert Eaglestone have highlighted, there are ensuing ‘artistic freedoms’ that come with poetry as a medium of expression rather than museums, Hollywood films, or memorials.¹⁸ As a result, they are not as subject to audience expectation or the modes of supply and demand, allowing the focus on the individual’s experiences rather than ‘the distortions of economic trammels prevalent in other artistic genres.’¹⁹ The sources for this article reflect the suggested ‘purity’ of poetry as unhampered by economic considerations and market value to the Holocaust ‘industry.’²⁰ The poems considered in this article, written by survivors and their spouses, are published in association journals that are freely circulated throughout the groups’ memberships and, more recently, available online. They exist therefore to present and convey information and feelings rather than representing a desire for economic profit or contributing to an industry. Although now online, these journals and newsletters were not always so freely available. Therefore, we can consider that some of these poems were written with a more private audience in mind.

Testimony is often considered ‘an unaesthetic form of written or oral attestation to historical suffering’ rather than ‘self-consciously literary forms such as poetry.’²¹ However, both forms of traumatic expression have a certain aesthetic and can bear witness to historical suffering in different ways. Therefore, they can be considered two types of an expansive concept such as testimony. In addition, attention has been drawn to the lack of scholarly work that gives credence to the importance of poetry as a testimonial device, highlighting that prose is the preferred medium.²² However, the value of poetry as such a device has been referred to in political debates as well as through scholarly works. Lord Shipley in a 2014 House of Lords Debate on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance emphasized that ‘Testimony not communicated is not actually testimony,’ and marked the various forms of doing so, including poetry, where ‘testimony can live on through the performer.’²³ Poetry is one example of testimony or reflection that conveys a shorter, more performative, and intense element, allowing scholars to unveil deeper subjectivity than the seemingly more objective medium of prose. While Holocaust poetry has become a ‘separate and self-contained genre,’ poetry authored by survivors creates a bridge between the aesthetic and the testimonial as survivors attempt to work through their experiences in poetic form and reveal their emotions, coping strategies and subjectivities.²⁴

¹⁸Antony Rowland and Robert Eaglestone, ‘Introduction: Holocaust Poetry,’ *Critical Survey*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2008): p. 3.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰See Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler; How History is Bought, Packaged and Sold* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²¹Antony Rowland, *Poetry as Testimony: Witnessing and Memory in Twentieth-Century Poems* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²²*Ibid.*, p. 3.

²³Lord Shipley, ‘House of Lords Debate - International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance,’ *House of Lords*, vol. 752 (27 February 2014), p. 752, accessed 21 March 2018, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2014-02-27/debates/14022777000345/InternationalHolocaustRemembranceAlliance>.

²⁴Sue Vice, ‘Holocaust Poetry and Testimony,’ *Critical Survey*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2008): pp. 7–15.

Poetry with its ‘spurts of vision’ and ‘moments of truth’ has challenged Adorno’s statements regarding poetry after the Holocaust, disrupting narrative coherence and suggesting the discontinuity of trauma.²⁵ This emphasis becomes markedly more pronounced when the poets are also the witnesses, whereby a journey can be glimpsed within their narratives and a means of coping with or working through their traumatic histories. Oral historians refer to a sense of wellbeing, coherence, and equilibrium in the interview space as composure, and opposite instances of this discomposure; poetry as an insight into creative subconscious processes also allows us to see this phenomena.²⁶ This article argues that poetry is not always used solely as a testimonial device, as a record of memories of the Holocaust years, but becomes a more nuanced medium where Holocaust survivors can reflect on current events and their present-day lives. Therefore, poetry becomes a form of creative expression, an outlet, and, for some, a coping strategy as well as a means to impart information. It is important to note that there are stark differences between imparting information such as historic fact and imparting a message such as one of tolerance and remembrance, and this article will be sensitive to these interpretations and contexts within each individual text.

The inadequacy of language – a poetic crisis

Second-generation writer Elizabeth Rosner began her 2017 book *Survivor Café* with an ‘alphabet of inadequate language,’ which itself had a poetic nature. She began with A for *Auschwitz*, *Arbeit Macht Frei*, *Atrocity* and *Atom bomb*, and systematically worked her way through the alphabet, covering other twentieth-century genocides, concentration camps, the names of individual perpetrators, lost languages, war, and silence. When she arrived at Z for *Zyklon B*, she emphasized: ‘Now go back to the beginning. See under: A.’²⁷ Here, she emphasizes how the lexicon of genocide should make more of an impact, but even with repeated exposure, they represent an alphabet, a way of talking about things without being truly cognizant of their meanings.

Elie Wiesel, as a survivor writing in 1983 in response to the release of the 1982 Alan Pakula film *Sophie’s Choice*, based on the 1979 William Styron novel, wherein the lead character played by Meryl Streep has to decide which of her two children to save at the gates of Auschwitz, affirmed: ‘We are grateful to anyone who takes interest in our past and is determined to transform it into art, but at the same time, we are angry with him for speaking in a manner, a tone, that inevitably cannot be ours.’²⁸ Wiesel expresses the duality of opinion present within individual survivors. However, when the survivor themselves crosses into realms of testimony and figurative representation of their own experiences, how does language work in these instances? The survivor is a witness, they have memories of trauma, but Wiesel emphasizes how language was incapable of representing these lived experiences:

²⁵Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz*, p. 7.

²⁶Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p. 22.

²⁷Elizabeth Rosner, *Survivor Café: The Legacy of Trauma and the Labyrinth of Memory* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2017), pp. xv–xviii.

²⁸Elie Wiesel, ‘Does the Holocaust Lie Beyond the Reach of Art?’, *New York Times*, 17 April 1983, accessed 10 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/17/movies/does-the-holocaust-lie-beyond-the-reach-of-art.html>.

How does one convey the anguish of a child on his way to the massgrave? how capture [*sic*] the despair of his father who has been rendered at the same time wild with rage and yet powerless? how retell [*sic*] that which escapes language? The survivor will forever be haunted by such questions. How is he or she to speak of what happened and at the same time not to speak of it? Our survival compels us to bear witness but we are unable to do so. We need to invent a new vocabulary, a new form of communication. All that remains is compromise which, some say, is 'better than nothing.' I am not so sure.²⁹

Wiesel's statement of the need for a new form of communication in response to the inadequacy of language to communicate the Holocaust is striking. What this new communication looks like remains somewhat unclear more than 30 years after his original writings. However, within survivor associations and refugee groups such as the Association of Jewish Refugees and the '45 Aid Society, there is a further grappling with the inadequacy of language. This conveys that, despite language being inadequate to represent their experiences, survivors are still attempting to find the right words to express their trauma.

These themes become clear in several case study examples of poems from the association journals, where the poets struggle to 'find the right words' to talk about their trauma. There is the issue of disbelief, as in: who would believe such horrors, and where would the audience for such work lie? This consideration is balanced with the feeling of a duty to tell of an 'incomparable evil.'³⁰ There is then a continual struggle with how to represent the past using literary, personal forms. This is illustrated in the below poem by Michael Etkind from which this article takes its title:

I searched for words
Which could convey
The truth about our past
To those who were not there

I searched for words
Which would describe
The fear that held us in its vice
And slowly ground us down

I searched for words
Which would describe the hunger
Which consumed us from inside
Throughout the day and night

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Jerry Schuchalter, *Poetry and Truth: Variations on Holocaust Testimony* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 8–13.

I searched ... to show
How hunger usually won
And made us risk
A bullet in the head
A blow with rifle butts
Or lashes on the back.

What do they know of hunger
Who only fast but once a year
And sometimes miss a meal?

What do they know of fear
Who have not been condemned
By Nazidom and never'lived'
Under its threat for years?

I searched for words to share
With those who were not there

I'm searching still.

At times of extreme danger I tried to abandon myself.

This poem structurally has lines of uneven length and syllable distribution, rising and falling in what can be compared to the process of recovering from trauma and struggling to find the correct descriptive agents to impart their histories to others. Beginning with a semblance of order and symmetry with the opening 'I searched for words' before the verse elaborates, upon reaching 'I searched ... to show' is indicative of a process of expressing feelings and experiences without consideration of a pattern. What the poem becomes is an unfiltered expression of certain resentments he holds due to not being able to articulate his experiences, as demonstrated in the line 'what do they know of hunger.' It is a common sentiment for survivors to feel this way, where comments such as 'I'm starving' can have real impact, marking the importance of the language used. A throwaway comment such as 'I'm starving' reminds survivors of their horrific experiences, not comparable to contexts they hear these terms in now.

Language such as this can end up being neutralized due to being used in hyperbolic ways, therefore using 'I'm starving' to represent a small inconvenience such as a missed meal reduces the impact of the word, meaning that it can never really convey

the extreme starvation that was happening in the camps.³¹ The line regarding a yearly fast, in reference to Yom Kippur, suggests that this mode of marking the day is not enough to empathize with the experiences of survivors. This further illustrates the perceived inadequacy of language in communicating Holocaust experiences, the impossibility of empathy with such an experience, and the continual quest by Etkind to attempt to find the correct words as a means of expression.

'I Searched for Words' is an evocative example of Holocaust survivor-authored poetry that directly traces the problem of finding the correct language to describe an individual's experiences. He grapples with communicating the risks he faced in concentration camps, the hunger, and the threat of death. Yet his penultimate line of 'I'm searching still' provides a sense of permanent incompleteness due to the amount of time that has passed, further affirming that the right words may never exist. At the final line, 'At times of extreme danger I tried to abandon myself,' the reader is left wondering if this is the closest Etkind's language can bring him to replicating or communicating his feelings about his history. The line marks a connection between the dehumanizing quality of the camps where through trauma he disassociates from his experiences, finding words to describe that eternally difficult, making the search for the right words to describe impossible.

Overall, Etkind's poem is not a testimony in the traditional sense; it does not provide information or specifics about his incarceration in multiple concentration camps, which is recorded in the form of oral history and written memoir. What it does provide is a short reflection on his belief that the right words to communicate his experiences do not exist. This in itself can be viewed as an expansion of the term *testimony*, further highlighting the importance of Wiesel's inadequacy of language thesis in survivor-authored texts, whether they are memoirs or poetry. Michael Etkind's above poem suggests that he himself was searching for words to describe his past. However, the inadequacy of language thesis can be extended to include the expectation from others that language can be found to describe a survivor's experiences, as is reflected in Avram Schaufeld's 'Do Not Ask' for the *AJR Journal* in 2017:

Do not ask
 How did you survive?
 Because this is a question that causes me pain
 and brings back memories ...
 I know that you mean well and are sympathetic
 and would like me to talk to your youth group
 or your son who is writing a paper on the Holocaust
 and I could help him with the subject which is part of his exams
 You add with a smile, that no amount of reading is the same
 as talking to a survivor.

³¹Lydia Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 15.

From your eager expression I can guess
 What you expect me to tell him.
 About our bravery and how our faith in God
 helped us to survive.
 I lie and say I am too busy
 that I have other commitments
 and quickly take my leave and turn away
 So that you cannot see the hurt in my eyes
 Do not ask me why ... ³²

Here Schaufeld challenges the hagiographical view of survivors and presents them in a very human light, as not only struggling to find the right words to describe their experiences but also not wanting to relive their traumatic memories with others. He is frank in his assessment of his pain and the onslaught of memories that accompanies giving testimony to an audience, and he flouts the tropes of survivor bravery, strength, resilience, and faith. The onslaught of memories, as evident with Etkind's poem 'I Searched for Words,' is represented in the lack of a cohesive pattern in terms of syllables, rhyming, and the uneven line length congruent with the ebbs and flows of trauma as time passes and individuals try to cope with and move on from these memories.

Schaufeld presents his defiance towards the expectations of others to find the words to speak about his experiences and being able to share his Holocaust survivor experiences with individuals. He hides behind the expectation that survivors are busy individuals who actively speak in public and says, 'I have other commitments,' but he emphasizes the dishonesty he conveys by doing so. This illustrates that many survivors are not willing to publicly find the words to engage with audiences about their experiences and further emphasizes that not only is language inadequate to describe the Holocaust, but the high expectations of others and perceptions of duty are an additional challenge. As with Etkind's 'I Searched for Words,' 'Do Not Ask' is not Schaufeld's testimony of his wartime years and does not recall specific events. Instead, it is his reflection on the many things he does not want to say and testifies to the expectation from many that he *should* be able to find the words and express them to others.

A further angle to the inadequacy of language thesis is *why* survivors push through this difficulty of describing their experiences and succeed in finding words to speak publicly and give testimony to a variety of audiences. This is framed within a lens of duty or obligation and is communicated through Michael Etkind's 2015 poem for the '45 Aid Society entitled: 'And Yet ... We Must':

A thousand deaths
 We die each time
 We catch
 A glimpse and see a fragment

³²Avram Schaufeld, 'Do Not Ask,' *AJR Journal*, vol. 17, no. 11 (November 2017): p. 11.

Of the Holocaust.

A thousand deaths

The train arriving at the ramp –
The barking dogs ...
The capos and the SS guards.

The mothers with their children
urged to hurry up.

And yet ... we must
Relive the past
And feel the pain ...
And keep the outrage live ...

And never let it fade and vanish from
the psyche of Mankind.

Etkind's 'And Yet ... We Must' conveys the commitment that Holocaust survivors feel towards the idea of 'Never again' and that this duty manifests itself in speaking about their experiences in service to their community and in honor of those who perished. Etkind highlights the importance of maintaining the outrage regarding the traumatic events of the Holocaust, giving survivors the task to embrace this historical mission of making people and society remember the horrors. However, in this presentation of keeping the outrage 'alive,' it is suggested that many survivors who have chosen to speak publicly struggle to move on. This can be communicated through the frequent ellipses, suggestive of hesitation in reliving these memories yet forcing himself to engage out of a sense of duty, and that something is missing in the recollection of these memories, both in motivation and content.

The poem also hints at triggers to fragments of the Holocaust, leading to survivors dying 'a thousand deaths' each time: Holocaust films, documentaries, and other cultural material such as literature are contributing factors to these fragmentary insights to the past. Yet the small number of words used in the poem further suggest the inadequacy of language: it is easier to read about capos, dogs, and iconic images of ramps and train lines as depicted in Holocaust photos and media. But, as with the other two poems representing the inadequacy of language, there is a feeling of absence, 'not enough' being said while volumes are spoken.

Overall, these three poems are not testimonies – there are no specific dates, places, or reference points, merely images that we have come to associate with the Holocaust and the resonance that survivors feel each day. Here, the authors reflect on what they cannot say, struggle to formulate, and indeed why they may choose not to say anything at all. These three poems act as broad case studies of survivor-authored poetry with respect to the perceived inadequacy of language. Despite these two poets being witnesses to the atrocity, there is still an absence of ability to fully communicate the horrors they experienced; therefore they do not fulfill Wiesel's challenge to find or invent a new form of communication to express their Holocaust pasts. Both poems were written in the latter half of the 2010s, suggesting that there is still a struggle to reinvent language to describe their horrors.

Poetry as past reflection

A further significance of poetry lies in its ability to allow survivors to reflect upon their past in the present. Notably, this does not represent poetry as a testimonial device, but allows for a focus on feelings and coping with a traumatic past. In the following poems, survivors reflect on community, isolation, being haunted by the ghosts of the past, how their experiences have been interpreted, and how they react to events in the present. We can see in the following four poems how poetry provides a space for this type of reflection, emphasizing that these survivors are individuals and do not possess one way of coping with their experiences and moving on with their lives. It is important to consider the contexts surrounding the publishing of these poems, the experiences of each author, and how they express their lived experiences through reflection in the present.

Cecilie Klein, who was liberated from Auschwitz, wrote this untitled poem focusing on the fragility of survivors as part of her memoir *Sentenced to Live*, published in 1983:

A survivor will go to a party and feel alone.
 A survivor appears quiet but is screaming within.
 A survivor will make large weddings, with many guests,
 but the ones she wants most will never arrive.
 A survivor will go to a funeral and cry, not for the
 deceased, but for the ones that were never buried.
 A survivor will reach out to you but not let you get
 close, for you remind her of what she could have been
 but will never be.
 A survivor is only at ease with other survivors.³³

Klein traces the importance of community in how survivors gravitate towards each other, innately knowing of each other's experiences and not needing to speak or articulate what happened to them. This is primarily due to these individuals being set apart from others and feeling a sense of isolation because of the disparity in their experiences. As a result, the psychological impact of traumatic experiences affects a sense of belonging for survivors, forcing them to seek community based on a shared trauma. Due to the horror the survivor has experienced, happy occasions become melancholic when ghosts of the past resurface, echoed in her example of crying for 'the ones that were never buried.' Klein uses repetition at the start of each line, grounding the poem from the perspective of the survivor, inflating this aspect of their identity until it is the sole aspect of their self-concepts, informing their day-to-day relations.

Klein's poem challenges the idea that survivors are 'normal' people who have experienced trauma and presents them as eternally damaged, echoing her own struggles as expressed in her memoir. The conflict between presentation and introspection

³³Cecilie Klein, *Sentenced to Live* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1988), p. 141.

becomes paramount as Klein examines the appearance of calm and silence but ‘screaming within,’ offering insight into the need to present a front of wellbeing despite this trauma through these two linguistic contrasts. This poem does not convey any testimonial power as to Klein’s experiences; however, it is a striking expression of her current pain. Therefore, she reflects on her present life as a survivor and speculates that others also feel this isolation because of their trauma. This is a poignant example of how not all survivors attain composure but in fact struggle to align their past and present existences, which manifest through poetry as a creative outlet.

Michael Etkind echoes this struggle through his 2009 poem ‘Do you still look at life?’ He does not highlight his personal experiences of reflection but broadens his scope as an interrogative poem to other survivors:

Do the camps
Still lay claim on your time
Do their ghosts
Still return in the night
Do you manage
To push them aside
Do they flee
When you put on the light

Are you slowly
Preparing for blows
As the clocks
Tick away with no pause
Are you still
As you were long ago
And ignore
All your troubles and woes
Have you really
Made peace with the world
As you near
The end of the line
Will you leave
With a sigh or a smile

Will you cling
 To the remnants of time

Will you leave
 With resentment and fear

Knowing
 Death's not the prettiest of sights

Do you hope
 You will not disappear

And believe
 That there is afterlife

The questions come easily to mind
 The answers are lagging behind.³⁴

Etkind makes extensive use of the words 'still' and 'really' and frames his poem with extensive interrogatives, not only emphasizing that time has passed but the modicum of disbelief that many survivors do not confront their pasts and are continually attempting to repress their traumatic histories. Here he seems to question whether other survivors have attained composure about their experiences or have become adept at putting on the type of front that Cecilie Klein suggests in her poem.

Etkind's poem is grounded in the idea of being haunted by the ghosts of the past, an ever-present nightmare that many fail to address. Yet his words do not appear as a judgment towards survivors who cannot move past their memories and 'cling to the remnants of time'; after all, he has attained similar experiences and understands the difficulties in doing so. What is particularly interesting about this poem is the poet's gentle reminder that time is running out and the imperative to 'make peace with the world.' The notion of a lack of time is also highlighted in his last two lines, where Etkind muses on the ease of asking questions but the difficulty in finding answers. As with Etkind's other poems examined in this article, there is an ebbing and flowing present within the poem's uneven line and syllable lengths.

As with Klein's previous poem, 'Do you still look at life?' enhances the 'otherness' of Holocaust survivors, that their experiences make them different and haunted and that it is difficult to escape. This poem differs from Klein's in its sense of optimism that it is possible to 'make peace with the world,' made more urgent by the closing in of the mortality of these individuals. This is a common sentiment among survivors, that their acceptance of their own mortality encourages them to pursue their roles as a witness but also to examine how they feel about their experiences and whether they have managed to leave the past behind and attain a sense of composure. Overall, Etkind's poem is a reflective

³⁴Michael Etkind, 'Do you still look at life ...,' *Journal of the '45 Aid Society* (2009): p. 37.

exercise on what he perceives as a central problem targeting survivors: how do they move on with their experiences as they face death? This poem unites with Klein's endeavor, that poetry is not a testimonial exercise but a method of reflection on how survivors cope, what is expected from them and what factors influence their drive to cope.

While Etkind's and Klein's poems convey the omnipresence of survivor memories and how they cope with this, other survivor-authored poems represent a desire or a duty to continue to remember and a reflection on what this actually means. Walter Bluhm's 'The Holocaust Through The Eyes Of The Beholder' grapples with the difficulties of this duty to remember:

What is guilt
 where does it begin
 where in the infinite of time
 in the spaceless universe
 in the perpetuity of life
 does it ultimately run into the nothingness
 which wipes it out

I know not hatred
 nor does spite fuel my existence
 I love my fellow beings
 though it is difficult almost impossible
 to love the whole of what we call mankind
 I know not retaliation
 vengeance is bitter and despoils the soil

But I remember
 vividly do I remember three generations of my pedigree
 I remember goodness kindness forgiveness
 joy hapiness [*sic*] exhilaration above all genuine affection
 I remember misery incarceration loss of liberty
 cruelty bestiality torture murder asphyxia
 be it benign be it malignant be it neutral
 I do remember

To what purpose?
 to warn posterity?
 to teach a lesson?
 to operate as a deterrent?
 to frustrate repetition?
 to none does memory pay homage
 because from history we learn
 that lessons are not learned from history

 I DO remember
 I shall not forget
 my son remembers
 and so will future generations
 remembrance
 as an act of holiness
 a private intimate moment to our dead.³⁵

Bluhm's poem have a similar flow to Etkind's work, demonstrating rises and falls in unequal line length and syllable distribution. Frequent interrogatives suggest a certain uncertainty as to the importance of his memories and contemplation, engendering confusion on behalf of the poet. Bluhm suggests the idea of blame and guilt as a black hole in the same way as revenge and hatred, framing his reflection on remembering with this central point in combination with the difficulties of loving mankind. He presents an optimism of holding on to the positive nature of humanity along with a recognition that this comes with a contrasting 'bad' side to human nature.

This poem is another reflective glimpse into the present life of a survivor, one that is questioning the remembrance of his past within his present. Bluhm questions the point of remembering as lessons are never learned, highlighting a problematic trope within Holocaust Studies that engaging with the past makes humanity 'better citizens,' leading to a 'misplaced optimism.'³⁶ He examines the contrasts of his memories between horror and kindness and continues to question to whom memory pays homage; in his view, it commemorates nobody. But this can be seen as more of an indictment of memory on a broader scale and the perceived 'collective memory' of the Holocaust by those who never experienced it.

What Bluhm marks as significant is the memory within the communities that suffered as an act of memorial to the dead. This grounds the privacy of mourning as more important than a societal commitment to remember the Holocaust. This

³⁵Bluhm, 'The Holocaust Through The Eyes Of The Beholder,' p. 27.

³⁶Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, p. 184.

differs from the broad theme of Holocaust survivors reflecting upon their memories in the present day. While Etkind's and Klein's poems first examined in this section highlight the despair of survivors, Bluhm questions the centrality of his testimony, prioritizing his remembrance by others means. However, the three poems unite in their questioning of the role that survivors play and how these individuals have coped with such experiences. This marks the wide divergence of experiences within the groups that survivors have formed and how they perceive their duties to Holocaust memory in the present.

While survivors do feel the pressures of duty in their remembrance, as Bluhm's poem suggests, this is not synonymous with sharing stories in a public platform. 'The Holocaust Through The Eyes Of The Beholder' does not give specific examples of lessons not being learned from the Holocaust but merely states that it is so. A poem published in 2003 by Michael Etkind in the *Journal of the '45 Aid Society* entitled 'England,' is an example of a poem that highlights lessons not being learned in a more specific manner. It is a plea to England as his 'adopted home' and 'refuge from a raging storm,' along with a call to action:

England arise
 Don't let injustice raise its head and spread
 To terrorise the world.
 Don't let dictators trample on man's faith.
 Man's faith and trust, in justice, freedom, hope ...
 Become a beacon and let your spirit rise
 Erase the darkness from the heart of man.
 Become a beacon and help the world to see
 That hatred enslaves – that compassion frees.
 Become a beacon for the world to learn
 That life's more precious than the purest gem.
 But, a life in letters – a nation in chains,
 Is a blot on man's conscience and is man's deepest shame.
 Become a fighter – make the world unit
 And struggle for freedom – for man's human rights.

 Be brave and persist – do not hesitate
 Mankind must be freed from anger and hate.

Etkind consistently uses imperative phrases to emphasize how strongly he feels that action should be taken. He marks his Holocaust experiences in referring to England as a place of sanctuary in the subtitle for the poem. Many survivors from the '45 Aid

Society continued to reside in England and gain British citizenship, retaining a special relationship with the country that accepted them in August 1945. This therefore links with the imperative phrasing, with survivors who settled in Britain viewing themselves as acculturated and assimilated citizens with a right to make demands of their nation linked with their experiences. The timing of this poem's publishing is particularly significant, taking place in the same year as the invasion of Iraq and subsequent war to disarm alleged weapons of mass destruction. The links with this event cannot be underestimated, with many survivors deeming Saddam Hussein, the then leader of Iraq, as a dictator who should be stopped.

The phrase 'Don't let injustice raise its head and spread/ To terrorise the world' draws a straight line between the Holocaust experiences of survivors and events taking place around the time the poem was published. This suggests that survivors see parallels and comparisons with their own experiences in the modern world, which can threaten their composure. By speaking out, they can attempt to retain this equilibrium. In this poem, Etkind reflects on present happenings and what he thinks the British government should do about them, but we cannot ignore the perspectives that his experiences give him, which add weight to the poem.

Once more, this poem does not provide a testimonial framework, nor are there dates, discussion of having experienced Holocaust events, or any forensic or factual information; it provides a reflection of feelings. A further contextual point to note is the implicit nature of sharing memories in a Holocaust survivor journal. As these Holocaust survivor communities know the details of each other's histories, explicit detail is not needed. There are specific examples of direct testimony in the prose of survivors in these journals, where they recount particular events, but this is less present in their poetry. There is a growing awareness of emotions and reflections rather than the 'facts' of a survivor's history and their memories within these groups that becomes manifest in their poetic contributions.

Poetry, then, does not just exist for Holocaust survivors as direct wartime testimony; arguably there are better methods to transmit the detailed and traumatic stories of their childhoods and adolescence in the camps. The creative influence of poetry as a means of expression allows for an unraveling of confused emotions that may be present in the individual. Language is not just inadequate for describing the Holocaust past; it also struggles to align the past with the present. This highlights how survivors struggle to 'fit in' with others due to their experiences, seeking composure as they reach the 'sunset of their lives'³⁷ or grapple with the idea of what it means to remember.

However, it also includes interpreting current events and attempting to align them with past trauma and memories, which provides the potential for re-traumatization yet also a sense of justice. These themes emerge in oral history interviews but become more emotive and reflective in the form of poetry, long established to 'stir something up in you' and to capture emotion that 'reaches beyond the shallow.'³⁸

³⁷Laura E. Finkelstein and Becca R. Levy, 'Disclosure of Holocaust Experiences,' *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 1 (January 2006): p. 126.

³⁸Brady, 'Anthropological Poetics,' p. 958.

Holocaust survivor spouses as poets

Holocaust survivors are not the only individuals writing poetry that attempts to come to terms with the past, align it with the present, and reflect on the inadequacy of language. The spouses of survivors have emerged as key composers of poetry within the association journals utilized for this project. In the case of members of the '45 Aid Society, around 90 percent of the survivors were male; therefore their wives were key authors of poetry surrounding their experiences of marrying a survivor. Consequently, we can gather that those who did not experience the Holocaust still can write poetry about it through the connections of marriage and processing the trauma of their spouses. Many married non-survivors whom they had met in their early years in the UK, either through the hostels in which the survivors stayed or the Primrose Club, where many of them socialized with the local Jewish community. As the young survivors were predominantly male, this was an opportunity to meet women from the local community.

Oral testimonies reveal that couples often discussed what they considered an appropriate level of detail to impart about one spouse's Holocaust experiences, which is evident in spousal poetry as well. Here, poetry becomes a further device to reflect, think through, and process, but for the spouses of survivors, this is indicative of processing a traumatic past and memories that they did not experience firsthand or could not understand. Jill Bamber's 1994 poem 'Marrying Out' for the *AJR Journal* echoes this:

Sleeping back to back I feel him running,
 our dual spine shaken with his nightmare
 stuttering in code through vertebrae
 I lean against him while he unburies pain.

Holding off in case this dream resolved
 I long to wake him, knowing that my touch
 may break into his sleep like Kristallnacht
 and shatter glass he has spent years repairing.

Blue-eyed, fair-haired, he by-passed hatred
 slipping through the streets where menace bristled.
 Wanting to belong where no-one spat
 his finger-prints and a big 'J' stamped his identity.

He wards off Nazis with a dream-slowed fist,
 blankets round his ankles as he runs
 through concrete fields where golden eagles stand,

All Nürnberg singing to the Führer.

Our living room is flickering with history,

ashen screen peopled with the dead.

He needs me sitting with him, watching Holocaust,

but turns my questions round to counter ignorance.

Smouldering, I remember my war,

then burn with shame to see him sifting through

the out-of-focus moving skeletons

searching for his mother's blurred face.³⁹

The poem begins with Bamber's husband's nightmares and how she sleeps with her back to him while he 'unburies pain.' By sleeping spine to spine, she can convey her presence to her husband and her support without being stifling in a more enveloping embrace. Here, the use of metaphors and illustrative figurative language cannot be underestimated, as we can glimpse direct links between the physical act of her husband leaning on her as he suffers nightmares and leaning on her emotionally in his waking life. The poem is indicative of her husband's trauma being confined to his subconscious and her terror in waking him, using the evocative symbolism of *Kristallnacht*, representing her husband's composure as fragile as glass. The structure of this poem appears more even than those directly authored by survivors, reflecting less trauma and the unburying of pain in poetic form.

However, overall the poem straddles and blends his nightmares and his waking state through discussing how he watches Holocaust footage. Bamber doesn't seem to understand why until the very end of the poem, when she realizes he is searching for evidence of his mother in the tapes. She presents how her husband needs her presence while he consumes Holocaust material, struggling to understand why their living room 'flickers with history' and conveying the disjuncture between 'her war' and 'his war.' She highlights the shame it provokes in her, indicative of how a disparity in experiences can open a gulf between couples despite attempts at understanding. Overall, this poem emphasizes the fragility and human nature of her survivor husband, a theme echoed in other poems that challenge a hagiographical perspective of survivors as strong and resilient and an inability for their spouses to comprehend what happened to them as manifested in striking, figurative language.

Lorna Berger's 1978 poem 'A Snapshot From Long Ago' also conveys a difficulty in understanding what her husband went through in multiple concentration camps before being liberated and brought to Windermere in August 1945:

Dislodged from its dusty shelf

The snapshot flutters to the ground

³⁹Jill Bamber, 'Marrying Out,' *AJR Information*, vol. 49, no. 7 (July 1994): p. 7.

Stooping I stretch to pick it up
And read – Theresienstadt – forty five.
A face stares back
Knowing no smile,
Bewildered eyes sear my sight
Lost in a lightless formless night
The pain and the hurt
Explode in my head,
All the long of the task filled day
From the garden to the house
And back,
I carry your eyes on a thought dark journey
And put them gently back
Upon the waiting shelf.⁴⁰

Berger's poem begins as a curiosity about her husband's experiences after discovering a photo of him as a young man at Theresienstadt. What follows is an insight into his pain and blankness through the expression in his eyes and the absence of a smile. When she refers to how 'The pain and the hurt/ Explode in my head,' we can glimpse how the flood-gates have opened with regard to her husband's memories and how difficult it is for her to comprehend such pain. This sentiment stays with her for the day, and she highlights how it forces her to see his experiences through his eyes on a 'dark thought journey.' What is significant is that Berger puts them 'gently back/ Upon the waiting shelf,' but it is unclear whether she is referring to the photo she found or his eyes through which she has spent the day seeing both the world and the Holocaust.

Berger suggests a need not to think about such trauma, and the question can be posed whether many spouses of survivors share this view, that deeply examining a traumatic past you did not experience is too much of a burden to bear. This raises the question of her husband's memories: can they be called on in such a way and then put back on the shelf when needed? For Berger, this seems to be a straightforward process, but in reality the situation is much more complicated, not just for spouses but for survivors themselves. Overall, Berger's poem gives the audience a glimpse into how spouses may stumble across a survivor's history and memories and how this can stay with them and cause sympathy and concern, along with trauma of imagining their Holocaust past.

However, the poetry that the spouses of survivors compose is not always suffused with fear, longing, and a struggle to comprehend their traumas. Some spousal poetry chooses to prioritize the postwar happiness of their families and their awe at their spouses for coping with their memories and focusing on the present. Sara Waksztok emphasizes

⁴⁰Lorna Berger, 'A Snapshot From Long Ago,' *Journal of the '45 Aid Society* (1978): p. 16.

this more positive dimension to being married to a survivor and by extension a member of the '45 Aid Society in her poem 'Living With You,' published in the society's journal in 1996:

From countryside and town, from families whole
From the Holy Land, all flowering and fresh,
We met you – so young and confident
Yet burdened with a terrible pain –
Nevertheless spreading cheer as you went.

It was hard to comprehend what lay hidden in your
innermost thoughts,
The loneliness and the inexplicable horror,
But in fact of it all, you have survived and even turned grey,
And still speak of the 'old girls and boys' of that bygone day.

You crisscrossed the world –
here, there and across the seas,
Taking part in industry, crafts and trade,
But always with chasms of the past entwined,
with the hopes of the day.

In the places you call home, every effort was made,
To live a life, serene, honourable and staid,
And those who chose to settle in the holy soil,
Took part in the rebuilding, exerting effort, sweat and toil.

The pain in your heart hasn't twisted your souls,
Rather served as a trigger to broach a new life,
From the ashes and despair you vanquished the past,
Set up a memorial and brought forth a full cast.
Living by your side, we ask and attend,
To plumb the depths and try to answer -
How was it possible? How can we comprehend?

And how shall we relate all these tales of the past?

The meaning of death, destruction and loss,
 To us they command even further effort,
 The new generation – a witness to your persistence,
 The amity and goodwill – an answer to the dread.

In spite of the problems, happiness abounds
 As we look around, how the family has grown!
 Our gratitude to those who brought all of this forth,
 In the ties of togetherness joy can be found.

May G-d grant us many more gatherings
 In health and in peace to all the '45!⁴¹

This poem represents the most structured of the poems examined in this article, with even line length and frequent use of rhyme. The significance of Waksztok's poem is the acknowledgement of trauma but the presentation of how her husband dealt with it with cheer and positivity, using past experiences as a motivation to start a new and better life using literal language. This provides a more positive angle to the ideas of psychological trauma as explored in the other two spousal poems. Waksztok prefers to highlight her husband and fellow survivors' zest for life in the wake of the Holocaust using the figurative illustration of rising from the ashes of a traumatic past and how this did not 'twist' their souls. This invigoration manifests in the new generations, prioritizing family life, stability, and moving forward, despite their inability to comprehend what happened to their spouse. She demonstrates a desire to understand along with an awareness that comprehension may never arrive, placing the 'old girls and boys' as a central vessel for that understanding. On the other hand, spouses and families become a form of stability, with their desire to create a home and security for survivors in light of their experiences, with each subsequent generation fueling that composure.

Waksztok also mentions Israel and those who made *aliyah* and traveled to reside in Israel, conveying a pride in how many survivors played a role fighting in the War of Independence and helped with building the state. This is but one part of the successes of survivors highlighted in this poem; she goes on to discuss their successes in industry and family life and how community and belonging is as important in the present as it was in the past. Overall, Waksztok prioritizes positivity while acknowledging that her comprehension of her husband's experiences can only go so far; she prefers to acknowledge how he and other survivors have managed to turn gray and broach a new life despite their experiences. Therefore, we can see here that Holocaust survivor spouses do not solely

⁴¹Waksztok, 'Living With You: From the Spouse of a '45er,' *Journal of the '45 Aid Society* (1996): pp. 47–48.

utilize poetry as a means for expressing their upset but also to reflect their optimism. This is particularly context bound and tied to the ‘zest for life’ encouraged within the ‘45 Aid Society, whose members have yearly reunions where the focus is on coming together and spending time as friends and a surrogate family rather than reflecting on shared trauma. ‘Living With You’ provides a contrast to the other poems where the spouse reflects on a survivor’s pain, with Waksztok fueling hers with what her husband has taken forward. It is important to include poems such as these, as they attempt to provide consolation to the traumatic experience, alongside other poems that indicate that this consolation is not possible and that survivors still struggle with the ghosts of the past.

These three poems written by Holocaust survivor spouses reflect how vivid metaphorical language can be used to bridge a lack of understanding. This lack of understanding does not come from a lack of empathy, but the inadequacy of language to reflect their spouses’ Holocaust experiences, along with a certain unwillingness on the part of the spouse to illustrate the dark depths of their memories from the war years. However, the poetry produced by Holocaust survivors does not need to be melancholy or a reflection of how little survivors cope with their experiences. As glimpsed in Sara Waksztok’s poem ‘Living With You,’ some survivors receive a zest for life from their experiences, and while this does not eradicate the horrors they experienced, it provides a certain optimism for their spouses and their families.

Conclusion

Survivor-authored poetry is not always a testimonial device. Details of individual experiences, such as dates, places, and names, are often missing. The poetry produced by survivors can present a different type of testimony that speaks to their current lives and gives them space to reflect on the impact of their trauma and how they align their past with their present. Therefore, testimony has an expansive definition encompassing the experiences of survivors both during the war years and as they cope with these memories in the present. This prioritizes themes of composure, coping, reflection, and creative expression, but also highlights how inadequate language can be when retelling the stories of such horror. Yet what else can be used? Jay Winter’s contention that the trauma of bereavement highlights the power of poetry as an expression of such bereavement is emphasized in Holocaust survivor-authored poetry.⁴² While poetry is a more ‘self-consciously literary’ genre, this does not suggest that meaning is lost; if anything, meaning is enhanced as emotions are condensed into a medium with reduced length and less space for words.⁴³ This provokes texts that are more raw, striking, and powerful, using fewer words to express larger emotions, events, and stories.

The alignment of past and present for survivors is not always a harmonious process. Etkind’s ‘I Searched for Words’ expresses discomposure at hearing people talk about hunger, directly comparing it to his experiences. This shows a merging of past and present, but not in a way that gives Etkind composure about his experiences; it becomes a merging that makes him relive them, make comparisons, and become angry and disillusioned about how hunger is expressed in the present. The struggle to

⁴²Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p. 2.

⁴³Rowland, *Poetry as Testimony*, p. 1.

align past and present is also echoed in Etkind's 'England,' where a straight line is drawn between his experiences in camps and dictatorial power in the Middle East in the present day.

These views challenge the hagiographical perspective of survivors; they are not saintly beings of strength, but humans with anxieties about the world shaped by their memories and trauma. This is extensively considered in Klein's untitled poem and Schaufeld's 'Do Not Ask.' The human aspect of survivors and their vulnerability is also echoed in the poems that survivor spouses produce about trying to comprehend these horrific experiences.

While many poems emphasize the duty of survivors to speak and their reflections upon this, both positive and negative, spousal poetry reminds audiences of the consequences of this. This further reinforces the human vulnerabilities of survivors. Despite these vulnerabilities, there are instances in which spouses reflect on their partners' effort to move on and spread cheer in spite of a traumatic history. And while many survivor-authored poems consider their vulnerabilities as individuals and as a group, their spouses' poems are more prone to positivistic representations of composure, family, and a zest for life in the wake of their traumatic experiences.

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