The Demolition of a Man: Autobiographies

‘Me, a man, crying’

‘Black milk came out of my breast.’
(Fanya Gottesfeld Heller, 1993:275)

Autobiography and memory

There is now more than half a century of writing about the Holocaust, of which life-writing forms a substantial part, from Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man* originally published in 1947 (2000) to the memoirs of the children of survivors such as Anne Karpf’s *The War After* (1996). There are people’s diaries written during the events themselves, as well as autobiographical accounts written afterwards. There are men and women’s perspectives as victims, survivors, perpetrators, bystanders, witnesses and rescuers of different religious and national identities. Conventional media studies scholars would not usually include an analysis of the genre of autobiography as part of a study of representations of the past, leaving this instead to the those within the fields of literature or history. But, I would suggest, a less orthodox and restricted approach is required here in order to understand the complex constellations of cultural mediations that construct social memories over time, especially since survivors’ life-writings constitute a key element in handing down the events of what happened, as evidenced by the development of young people’s socially inherited memories of the Holocaust (Interviews and Focus Groups, USA, April 1999; Poland, April 1998; Britain, 1998, 2000). Life-writing as a medium for communicating the past is also at the interstices between the individual and
the social or public domain. As Nicola King (1996) points out, autobiography is the point where individual memories are reworked in their broader social and cultural contexts (p. 50–62). Which of these autobiographies is more remembered than others and how the authors tell what happened is an important part of understanding how these individually gendered stories relate to broader gendered structures and gendered socially inherited memories.

This chapter focuses on a selection of autobiographies by Jewish men and women victim-survivors to explore what they tell us about the social inheritance of what survivor Primo Levi (2000) referred to as ‘the demolition of a man’ (p. 32). The chapter considers how the medium of the written word renders gender and atrocity a part of our socially inherited memory of the Holocaust. I draw on broader literary and gendered theories of autobiography and life-writing to explore what particular texts reveal about the ways in which individual and social memory and forgetting are constructed in ways that are gendered. I focus, mostly, on published written testimonies, rather than those only available in archives, because their availability means that they are more central to peoples’ social memory of the events, as well as being accessible to readers of this book. I examine Jewish men and women’s experiences of going into hiding, experiences of the lesser-known camp of Stutthof (near what was known as Danzig, now Gdansk) and the death and work camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau, in what was German occupied Poland. This is not to deny the validity of accounts by Jewish people in other camps, or accounts by non-Jewish survivors. Neither it is to suggest that we should only focus on the accounts of victims and survivors; to look at written accounts by perpetrators, rescuers or witnesses of the Holocaust, is also crucial to our understanding and would form an interesting basis for additional research.¹ The decision to focus on particular accounts by victims and survivors rather than others is to provide a point of focus that allows for an in-depth analysis, as well as a cogent framework for comparison. The main texts I consider are primarily those that were mentioned by young people in the US, Britain and Poland as important to them and which are well known and easily available in English: The Diary of a Young Girl, by Anne Frank (Frank and Pressler, 1997), Elie Wiesel’s Night (1982) and Primo Levi’s If This is a Man (2000). To ensure the inclusion of at least some subaltern memories of the Holocaust, though, and to bring together, to reconcile men and women’s memories of the events, I have also included analyses of less well-known published accounts by women survivors, including Fanya