



## Translating the Memory of the Holocaust: Thomas Geve's Memoir

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the most significant challenges of translating the memory of the Holocaust, focusing on the difficulties of transferring a survivor's testimonial account to a different linguistic and cultural system. Because the concentration camp experience is inherently multicultural, and survivors have chosen to pen their ordeal in several languages, translation epitomizes a discipline that intertwines directly with the construction of universal collective memory. Consequently, translating Holocaust memoirs poses challenging questions on hermeneutics and deontology. Throughout the following pages, I will critically analyze my own Spanish rendition of Thomas Geve's memoir, *Guns and Barbed Wire: A Child Survives the Holocaust* (1987), so as to delve into the ethical commitments borne by a translator, and into the formal and stylistic complexities inherent to the translation of concentrationary literature.

**Key Words:** concentrationary literature, Holocaust, translation, collective memory.

### [es] La traducción de la memoria del Holocausto: el testimonio de Thomas Geve

**Resumen.** Este artículo explora los retos más significativos asociados a la traducción de la memoria del Holocausto, centrándose en las dificultades de trasladar el testimonio de un superviviente a otro sistema lingüístico y cultural. Dado que la experiencia de los campos de concentración es intrínsecamente multicultural, y los supervivientes decidieron relatarla en diversas lenguas, la traducción se convierte en una disciplina que entrelaza directamente con la construcción de una memoria histórica universal. En consecuencia, la traducción de las memorias del Holocausto plantea cuestiones relevantes sobre hermenéutica, ética y deontología. En este artículo, realizaré un análisis crítico de mi traducción al español de la obra de Thomas Geve, *Guns and Barbed Wire: A Child Survives the Holocaust* (1987), para profundizar en los compromisos éticos asumidos por el traductor, así como en las complejidades formales y estilísticas inherentes a la traducción de literatura concentracionaria.

**Palabras clave:** literatura concentracionaria, traducción, Holocausto, memoria histórica.

**Sumario.** 1. Introduction: Literature, Translation and Historical Memory. 2. Thomas Geve: Witness, Survivor and Author. 3. Bearing Witness: Concentrationary Literature. 4. Translating Thomas Geve's Memoir: Challenges and Strategies. 5. Conclusions and Discussion.

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## 1. Introduction: Literature, Translation and Historical Memor

On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, humankind assembled to solemnly commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. More than two hundred survivors returned to the former Nazi death camp to bear witness once again and to speak on behalf of those who had been forcedly silenced. There is no doubt: in order to be able to approach the concentrationary experience as outsiders, it is essential to explore the memoirs legated by survivors. Sánchez Zapatero (2010: 41) suggests that literature is a rightful means to transmit and materialize historical memory, and claims that collective memory is partially based on personal interpretations of events. Therefore, being a victim, a witness and a survivor is sufficient legitimation to raise one's voice and share one's experience (43). Each Holocaust testimony is different and unique, and therefore needs to be listened and recorded; in turn, each individual story builds up to collective memory, a shared experience of universal significance. Elie Wiesel, Auschwitz survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, believed that "forgetting meant that the enemy had won. The executioner always kills twice, the second time to cover all traces and evidence of his crime. To forget is to become his accomplice. One had to testify, in order that there be no forgetting" (1974: 314). Hence, as the Holocaust fades from living memory, it is our duty to prevent the truth from vanishing and being forgotten.

Most of concentration camp survivors penned their experience in their mother tongues, but current academic discussion on the Holocaust is generally conducted in an Anglophone framework, even though English was neither the native language of the perpetrators, nor that of the victims (Kuhiwczak 2007: 62). In this regard, Rosen (2005) has explored to what extent academic writing in English has shaped our understanding of the Holocaust. As a result, scholars and readers have relied too much on English translations, rather than on the survivors' original words, and thus the phenomenon of translation has also profoundly influenced our interpretation of the events (Boase-Beier 2018). Furthermore, concentration camp survivors have repeatedly highlighted the ineffability inherent to the experienced events, meaning that it is impossible to wholly express trauma through traditional discourse. If they doubt their own capability of conveying the whole truth, how can we, as translators, face our task?

On the other hand, however, there is also a vast corpus of memoirs that was originally written in English, as is the case of Thomas Geve's. Choosing a foreign language to tell such an appalling experience must have been an extremely challenging endeavor for them. Firstly, this decision may suggest that, to a certain degree, these survivors who had migrated to an English-speaking country felt included in the Anglo-American society that had sheltered them, and that they wanted this determined community to respond to their texts. Secondly, since English developed as a *lingua franca* during the second half of the last century, by selecting it they could address a larger readership (Kuhiwczak 2007: 62). Finally, perhaps they refused to describe their ordeal in their mother tongues as a way to distance and protect themselves from their traumatic past, engendering "a survival narrative through language as refuge" (Gigliotti 2009: 19). In any case, survivors like Geve, a German victim who decided to tell his story in English, underwent a process of mentally assimilating and translating their Holocaust memories into a foreign language. Their memoirs, thus, echo the desperate struggle of trying to convey an already unspeakable truth in a foreign tongue. Definitely, reflecting on these texts through the lens of translation studies may prove enlightening for the discipline.

Through the following pages, I will critically approach my own rendition of Geve's testimony in order to delve into the deontological dimension of Holocaust translation and determine which ethical responsibilities underlie this process. Translating concentration camp memoirs is a particularly challenging affair, because translators "pursue the representation of meaning across two linguistically, temporally and conceptually disparate systems of signification" (Munyard 2016: 90). On the one hand, my goal is to determine, by analyzing my own experience and results, which translation strategies are suitable for documents of this nature. On the other, I will reflect on the abilities that translators must acquire in order to fulfill their task professionally, ethically and efficiently. Firstly, I will introduce Thomas Geve's biography and I will present his work. Secondly, I will go on to examine the central stylistic and thematic tropes in concentrationary literature, focusing on their expression in Geve's text. Once these matters have been duly discussed, I will begin to critically assess my own work by exploring the specific challenges confronted throughout the translation process.

## 2. Thomas Geve: Witness, Survivor and Author

Thomas Geve was born in 1929, in Stettin, to a German Jewish family. He was only three years old when the Nazis seized power and, therefore, he suffered persecution and anti-Semitism from a very young age. At the end of 1938, Thomas' family moved to Berlin, and he was enrolled in a Jewish school, until it was officially closed. Thomas' father feared arrest and was able to receive political asylum in England, where he moved in the summer of 1939. The plan was for Thomas and his mother to follow him as soon as they were legally able, but emigration became impossible when the War broke out and they were left stranded in Germany. In June of 1943, they both were deported to Auschwitz. They were separated on arrival, and Thomas managed to pass the death selection thanks to his height. After the quarantine period, he was able to enroll in the bricklaying school of Auschwitz, which took in young boys. During the nineteen months he survived in Auschwitz, he mainly worked in construction *Kommandos*.

In the beginning of 1945, as the Soviet troops approached the occupied area of Poland, the Nazi executioners evacuated prisoners towards the heart of the Reich. Many of the deportees who were forced on the fatal death marches died, but Thomas was able to make it. After passing through Gross-Rosen, he entered Buchenwald, where he remained until the liberation of the camp. After the war, he recovered at a boarding school for teenage survivors in Switzerland, until he was able to locate his father and meet him. He finished high school in London and subsequently graduated in engineering. Since 1950, Thomas Geve resides in Israel, together with his children and grandchildren<sup>2</sup>.

After liberation, while he was still at Buchenwald, too weak to leave the camp, he felt the urge to communicate his experience, and he chose drawing as the best means of expression. He recorded his wartime ordeal in more than 80 extremely expressive illustrations, most of which are now which are now exhibited at the Yad Vashem Art Museum,

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<sup>2</sup> For further information about the author and his work, please consult his personal website: <http://www.thomasgeve.com>.

in Jerusalem. Between 1947 and 1949, he was able to put his childhood drawings into words, and in 1958 *Youth in Chains* was finally published by a small Israeli publishing house. In 1987, an American house issued *Guns and Barbed Wire: a Child Survives the Holocaust*, which also included some of his drawings. His testimony, therefore, reveals an intersemiotic nature, as different systems of signs interact to convey the message and build the network of signification (Jakobson 1959: 238). Of course, this feature also needs to be considered when undertaking its translation, as both systems of signs are bound together to bear meaning, but the translator can only modify one of them.

Finally, Thomas Geve was significantly one of the first survivors who stepped up to tell the ordeal suffered by the youngest deportees, most of whom died in the concentrationary universe, lending his own voice to all the children who were unable to speak for themselves. His memoir is extremely relevant because it explores in depth the experience of deported children, the most vulnerable victims of the concentrationary system (Lew-Wiesel & Amir 2005; Heberer 2011). In the following section, I will examine the fundamental traits of his work, since understanding Holocaust autobiographical literature, and contextualizing each author's voice, is the initial step in the process of translation.

### 3. Bearing Witness: Concentrationary Literature

Polish *Shoah* survivor Michel Borwicz authored one of the earliest studies devoted to Jewish literature created under Nazi occupation. According to him, the literary legacy of the Holocaust displays deep heterogeneity at discursive, stylistic and thematic levels. Generally, survivors were not professionally trained writers, but rather individuals who felt the urge to communicate their most traumatic memories (1996: 350-352). In fact, many of the authors, as Thomas Geve, only wrote for the very first time to record their ordeal. Therefore, their works commonly lack elaborate expressive forms and tend to bear witness through a colloquial, straightforward and bare discourse. However, following Borwicz, it is not fair to judge survivors' texts according to their stylistic or formal accomplishment. Instead, they should be considered because of their frankness, expressiveness and honesty: they should be judged according to the author's ability to awaken honest emotions in the readers and to express the transcendence and universal significance of the experience (1996: 354).

Geve's prose is simple and plain; his sentences are short and unembellished by elaborate rhetorical tropes. In fact, his style can already be discerned in the lines that head the first chapter, in which he evokes a normal day in the German capital in the late 1930s: "It was a hot, stifling summer's day in the Berlin of 1939. Shoppers, travellers and sightseers crowded the Potsdamer Square. Delicatessen shops displayed the world's luxuries, neatly wrapped and labelled. A florist's water-cooled showcases offered the choicest roses" (1987: 1). As he delves into his personal tragedy, though, his writing proves to be spontaneous, expressive and highly intimate. He tries to take the reader on a journey through the eyes of a young boy, remaining faithful to the actual way he had experienced the camps during his childhood, in much the same way as Kertész did in his autobiographical novel *Fateless* (2006). When translating Geve's text into another language, this concrete narrative voice has to be thoroughly taken into account so that the target text may remain faithful to the original, not only regarding its contents, but also concerning the effects obtained in the reader through these particular aesthetics and narrative atmosphere. In this regard, I would suggest

a communicative translation approach that “attempts to produce in the readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original” (Newmark 1981: 39). However, as I will argue in the following section, certain features of the source text, such as the intense coexistence of different languages, require a much more semantic translation strategy because the target text needs to recreate the precise flavor of the original by conserving this otherness emphasized by the author.

Geve explicitly stated the purpose of his book in the preface to the original edition, published in 1958: “the memoirs before you are not those of somebody famous but of someone who was only one of thousands. I did not intend to write a bestseller. I have merely recorded the truth” (1987: 1). Survivors such as Geve, who decide to bear witness through writing, are driven by a moral imperative, which compels them to tell the truth. This commitment, moreover, is perceived as an inescapable obligation for all those who had endured the concentrationary experience:

We did not want to forget. On the contrary, we felt an urge to set what we had witnessed on paper and to tell about it. I, too, was gripped by this desire, if we who had experienced it, I reasoned, did not expose the bitter truth, people simply would not believe about the Nazi ogre (1987: 205).

Survivors, therefore, feel as entitled witnesses who bear the responsibility of letting the world know, even if by doing so the traumatic experience is painfully triggered once again. Conveying the camp experience, however, can never be an easy task. Trauma studies (Laub 1992: 57-58) have highlighted the immeasurable nature of deportation. Survivors, in turn, have frequently emphasized the ineffability inherent in the experienced events, meaning that it is impossible to fully express the trauma through traditional discourse and language; hence, survivors’ accounts reveal the struggle of authors who endeavor to put into words an unspeakable truth. Indeed, the entire concentrationary universe seems imaginary, unreal and illusory. This idea is reflected in Thomas Geve’s account since he deliberately chooses “The Hidden World” (1987: 34) as the title for the section of his book devoted to deportation. In fact, soon after arriving at Auschwitz, he describes it as if “it was another world, unique in its depressing gloom” (1987: 36). Thus, the tension between reality and language is a constant struggle mirrored in survivors’ memoirs, and this anxiety can only make translation a more complex affair.

Reflecting on Holocaust autobiographical literature, Tzvetan Todorov has coined the term “exemplary memory” (2010: 275), a concept that refers to the appropriate use of historical documents, which in all cases should seek to critically examine events within a comparative framework, aimed at the ultimate purpose of drawing a lesson from dark happenings, in order to prevent them from occurring again in the future (276). Other scholars, on the contrary, defend the paradigm of Holocaust exceptionalism, and thus refuse to compare it to any other event because any comparison would trivialize the suffering of the victims (Clarke *et al.* 1996). However, Todorov believes this idea of exemplary memory to be one of the central tropes manifested in every survivor’s account, which is also closely related to the survivors’ desire of justice. In this sense, Thomas Geve recalls Buchenwald’s liberation: “We also pledged ourselves never to forget our common sufferings. The remnants of our suppressors and their supporters must be brought to justice” (1987: 209). The pursuing of exemplary memory, moreover, intertwines with another decisive concern uttered by the authors: that of paying tribute and being the voice of all fallen, silent comrades.

We had not lingered in concentration camps as individuals, but as youngsters unwanted and forgotten. Millions of our Jewish comrades had not even been allowed to embark upon this bitter struggle for survival that was over now. They were murdered –monstrously and wholesale– before even having had a chance to realize it. ... They hailed from all over Europe –some even from Asia– and their beliefs and emotions were different and many. But they had come to be part of us. In our memories they lived on, and what they had wanted to say we would say. That was another cause to unite us. If only we were confident and determined, we would succeed (1987: 195).

#### 4. Translating Thomas Geve's Memoir: Challenges and Strategies

Survivors' accounts are rooted in extremely traumatic experiences and, as such, translators need to unravel their own role as listeners and communicators in the process of conveying someone else's ordeal in a different language. According to Colin Davis, trauma studies should attempt to address a particularly significant issue: "Who should speak for those who do not speak for themselves —the dead, the mute, the traumatized, those who cannot or will not tell their own stories, or those who have no story to tell?" (2018: 11). Davis argues that it is impossible to narrate the life and death of the other without distorting it to a certain extent and, consequently, it is essential to analyze the other's trauma while keeping a respectful distance, so as to avoid an undue appropriation of their experience; in short, he claims that "we do not participate in or co-own the other's trauma; and the sense or desire that we do should be resisted because it gives us the potentially self-serving illusion of empathic understanding" (12). Instead, he believes that trauma studies should only aim at recognizing, acknowledging and approximating the suffering of others. Assuming as a starting point that the author and the text do not say only or exactly what they want to say, the reader must be prepared at all times to interpret the silences and absences as much as any explicit or obvious statements (44).

Psychiatrist Dori Laub, a Holocaust survivor himself, differs significantly from Davis. In fact, he suggests that "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (1992: 57). Laub's standpoint stems from the idea that a survivor can only become a true witness when he or she is heard by another person; in fact, victims acquire full knowledge of the experienced event only by communicating their stories to another individual. The act of bearing witness, therefore, involves necessarily a speaker and a listener. Dori Laub describes the ideal interlocutor as someone who knows how to listen, understand and respect the victim's voluntary or unintended silences (58). Even though translators may not be direct, physical listeners to the trauma, their role is even more significant than that, because not only do translators need to comprehend the survivor's suffering and relate to it, but they later on must become the author's voice, respectfully and professionally. Despite Davis's and Laub's divergences regarding the concrete owning of the trauma, both authors make a significant statement about the ethical responsibility borne by those who listen to the survivor's experience, such as translators. Namely, the fact that any hearer must acknowledge the extreme nature of the experience and must respect the survivor's choices regarding what to tell and what not to tell. Any translator must,

in the first place, comprehend and assimilate the author's voice and experience. As Peter Davies has claimed, "an intimate knowledge of the witness's voice is the key for conveying the style and spirit of their writing. Speech is given priority over writing as the source of authority, and style is discussed in terms of voice" (2014: 215).

Andrea Hammel has explored the influence of social variables in the transmission of the memory of the Holocaust. According to the author, when testimonial texts are translated into different cultural systems, the decisions made by translators and editors intervene decisively in the outcome of the target version, which always leans towards the specific audience of the recipient culture. Similarly, when it is survivors themselves who transfer their work to other languages, they actually undertake a process of rewriting, adjusting their texts to the context of the new readers and "thus exposing the fact that the meaning of an autobiographical text lies in the interrelationship between text and context rather than in the originating life or in the written text conceived of as a monolithic unit" (2004: 305). Translating Holocaust memoirs nowadays implies the approaching of two absolutely different cultural, historical and sociological systems. This ontological breach deepens, for instance, considering the voicing of trauma in deportation narratives: the concentrationary universe, as Thomas Geve's memoir reveals, embodies a unique, extreme reality that is scarcely possible to understand for those who have not experienced it. A survivor and their translator, therefore, generally lack shared background knowledge and sometimes even common vocabulary, as an extremely singular language flourished in the concentration camps (Miñano-Mañero 2016). In an attempt to overcome these difficulties, according to Sylvia Degen (2016: 185), a source-text oriented translation strategy is the most suitable way of approaching Holocaust memoirs, and translators should seek to bring the target culture to the original reading space as much as possible. Degen has highlighted the idea that, even though survivor and translator stand ontologically apart from each other, they both share the same central concern and manifest a similar *skopos*: namely, that nothing of that nature ever happens again in the future and that the survivors' accounts have an igniting impact on the recipients, motivating discussion and critical thinking (197).

The direct relationship between a Holocaust survivor and his or her translator has been a considerable object of discussion, which proves the unavoidable intertwining of historical memory and translation deontology. The interaction between Italian survivor Primo Levi and his German translator epitomizes this bidirectional dialogue, and demonstrates survivors' interest in the translation of their works. In *The Drowned and the Saved* (2015), Levi expressed his deep concerns regarding the German rendition of his first autobiographical account, *If This Is a Man*. He was extremely preoccupied with the German version of his testimony because he believed that the German people of the post-war period borne a unique responsibility towards their recent past. Thus, Levi wanted his text to reach the target audience exactly as he had intended to put it into words in Italian. He claimed that he did not trust his German publisher whatsoever: "I wrote him a letter bordering on insolence, warning him not to remove or change a single word of the text, and making him agree to send me the manuscript of the translation in installments, chapter by chapter, as the work progressed" (459). Levi wanted to check its fidelity to their innermost meaning. Heinz Riedt, a citizen from East Berlin who had deserted the army and had taken part in the Italian Resistance, undertook the translation project. Levi believed Riedt to be an appropriate candidate for this endeavor, since he was a professionally

trained translator and, furthermore, had been a resistent himself during the war, and therefore was also politically and ethically committed to revealing the hidden truth about the Third Reich.

Levi believed, however, that ideological engagement and translation skills were not sufficient to ease his worries. The mere thought of being translated arouse great anxiety: “It was the first time I had encountered the always burning, never gratuitous adventure of being translated, of seeing my thoughts manipulated, refracted, my words sifted, transformed, or misunderstood, or maybe invigorated through an unexpected resource of the new language” (466). Levi was extremely preoccupied about how the broken, distorted language of the camps, *die Lagersprache*, would be translated into German. He exchanged several letters with Riedt to ensure that the spirit of his text would be respected in the target version, and he personally supervised each fragment. Once the translation was finished, he wrote to Riedt, stating that:

I am glad, and satisfied with the result, and grateful to you, and at the same time, a little sad. You see, this is the only book I wrote, and now that we have finished transplanting it into German I feel like a father whose son has come of age and leaves, and no longer needs his care (464).

Levi’s experience is highly illustrative of the passionate relationship that may be built between a survivor and his or her translator, when they have the opportunity of interacting with each other. Even when this is not possible, Levi’s words prove how meaningful the translation of Holocaust memory is. *Ist das ein Mensch?*, Riedt’s German rendition of Levi’s testimony, came out in 1961, sixteen years after the war, a period in which Nazi trials were being conducted and in which many of the Nazi atrocities were still relatively unknown or ignored. In fact, that same year began the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. To lead the prosecution, the Israeli legal team summoned more than a hundred witnesses, most of who were Holocaust survivors, to set out their stories. The extensive use of survivors as witnesses and the shift to a victim-centered prosecution led to the creation of the “witness-driven atrocity trail” (Landsman 2012: 69), a new template for international atrocity prosecutions that had to rely necessarily on translation and simultaneous interpretation, since witnesses were native speakers of different languages (Morris 1998: 1). Translating Holocaust testimonies at that time, therefore, served as a powerful social and legal weapon to let the world know and to demand justice.

It should be borne in mind that the circumstances are no longer the same in the present. Nowadays, when translating a Holocaust memoir, we no longer seek lawful punishment, but rather historical reconciliation and overcoming, while paying tribute to the victims and listening to each one’s own truth. In my own experience, during the months I spent submersed in Geve’s testimony, I had the marvelous chance of directly interacting with the author and some of his relatives. Thomas Geve was also highly concerned with the translation of his words. He reassessed his original writing and handed me a list of amendments that he wished to add in the Spanish edition. These were mainly related to small linguistic corrections and historical details: his knowledge regarding certain figures and specific locations had broadened six decades after composing the original text. His determination to improve his writing, to make it even more historically accurate, can only prove Geve’s commitment to the truth. The style and spirit of the text, however, remained untouched, as he sought

to transmit his testimony as he had initially intended. On the other hand, both Geve and I coincide that the most significant contribution of our translation relates to the fact of bringing his voice, a personal experience of unquestionably universal significance, to a new audience, the Spanish-speaking world.

Translating Geve's memoir has represented a considerable challenge for me, which has allowed me to meditate on the inherent difficulties of such a task, as well as on the specific skills needed to fulfill the work satisfactorily. Before anything else, as I was the one to conceive and promote the translation project –and my publishers gave me great freedom throughout the whole process–, I had to decide and state the purpose of my work. Since my current research focuses on the concentrationary universe, I put forward a proposal to elaborate a comprehensive academic edition, which not only conveyed Geve's words, but also helped the readers to immerse themselves in the reality of the camps as much as possible, knowing myself that this is an impossible task for any outsider. Hence, I decided to write a brief prologue, which introduces the author's work and, particularly, the most significant thematic and rhetorical traits of concentrationary literature. Moreover, I assumed that readers needed to know certain aspects about the camp society and structure to appreciate such a piece of work and understand its significance, particularly when Geve portrayed social interaction and certain specific situations. Therefore, whenever I deemed it suitable to provide an explanation, I added an auxiliary footnote providing further information and bibliographical references about the concentrationary system.

Furthermore, because this translation project is intimately connected to historical memory, I resolved to encourage the readers to learn more about the subject. Thus, I took advantage of certain passages in the memoir to suggest, through footnotes, further paradigmatic reading about the camp experience. For example, when Geve narrates an episode about the camp orchestra, I opted for providing additional references on the interweaving of music and the Holocaust (Fénelon 1997; Gilbert 2005), since this topic has been the subject of profound discussion for many years. In the same way, when Geve bears witness about the annihilation of the *Zigeunerlager* in Auschwitz, the section reserved for Gypsies, I decided to mention the memoir of Otto Rosenberg, *A Gypsy in Auschwitz* (2000), one of the very few Gypsy survivors who have chronicled their ordeal through the camps. Hence, it is fair to state that I wanted my work to exceed the task of a mere translator; in contrast, my purpose was, from the beginning, to become a guide for the readers, to inspire in them the desire to learn more about the camps, and to help them access the concentrationary universe by providing key references and clarifying basic concepts. This is highly illustrative of Degen's idea that a translator may partake in the author's own *skopos* and ethical commitments (2016: 197). The decision to suggest further reading was supported by the idea, stated by both academics and survivors, that fully comprehending the reality of the *Lager* is impossible for anyone who did not experience it (Wiesel 1975: 314-315; Sánchez Zapatero 2010: 114). As outsiders, we can only hope to achieve a partial understanding through thorough research and reading.

Finally, because the translation was aimed at a Spanish readership, I wanted to connect Geve's experience to the history of this country by remembering the Spanish Republicans who were also deported to Nazi concentration camps —more than 8.000 in total, most of whom were transferred to Mauthausen, in Austria (Wingate Pike 2015: 75). During the last decades, there has been a considerable interest to recover and confront the historical memory of the Spanish Civil War, which neces-

sarily intertwines with the Nazi *Lager*. Hence, throughout this endeavor, researchers and historians have emphasized and visibilized the role of Spanish deportees (Bermejo 2002, 2006; Toran 2005). Definitely, their experience in the Nazi *Lager* proves crucial in the shaping of Spain's current and future discussions on historical memory because, as Brenneis has claimed, "Mauthausen will outlive its witnesses and remain a symbolic site for successive generations who seek to understand the Nazis' crimes and Spain's past trauma" (2018: 40). Thus, I also reflected about their ordeal in the prologue of the Spanish translation and, whenever Geve referred to them in the text, I chose to suggest some additional reading about them. Specifically, I recommended the recent work by Hernández de Miguel (2015), who personally interviewed and transcribed the memories of the last Spanish survivors of Mauthausen. Thus, by choosing this book, I hoped to help the target readership relate to the concentrationary universe more directly and to bridge the gap between the present and the past.

Deportation is, by definition, a transnational and intercultural experience, affecting individuals from several different social and geographical backgrounds. Considering the history of Nazi concentration camps, it is obvious that the construction of a European collective memory allows—and demands—reflection from diverse cultural angles, and that every discussion on the subject leads to the connection of various nations and peoples. This inherent multiculturalism is frequently mirrored in survivors' accounts, and therefore has an impact on the concrete skills needed to translate a memoir. Firstly, it should be stated that translating concentrationary narratives is never a merely bilingual affair, but rather an extremely polyglot matter. Prisoners from all over Europe were huddled together behind the barbed wire and, as such, a multilingual protolanguage, functioning as a *lingua franca* to enable verbal interaction, crystallized in the camps, reflecting the specific social and demographical characteristics of each space. Oschlies (1985), Taterka (1995), and Aschenberg (2002) were pioneers in conducting research on the *Lagerszpracha*, the term that has been coined to label this protolinguistic multilingual form of communication. The tremendous significance of this linguistic environment cannot be denied; in fact, most of the survivors reflect the *Lagerszpracha* in their memoirs. Since my field of expertise is language contact in the concentrationary universe (Miñano-Mañero 2016, 2020a, 2020b), I believe I have been able to grasp the linguistic chaos of the camps as Geve wanted to express it, and I have tried to form the same impression and rhetorical effect in the target version.

Regarding the camp's sociolinguistic singularities, my main goal was to respect and convey the original tone and flavor of the text created by Geve, who frequently reproduced broken, rudimentary, multilingual conversations, and echoed in his memoir the many languages that were heard in Auschwitz. Even though he had the crucial advantage of being a native German speaker, and therefore mastered the perpetrator's language, he was initially helpless before other relatively influential tongues such as Polish or Russian. Geve's testimony mirrors the linguistic chaos in Auschwitz with extreme precision. For instance, even though his memoir was written in English, he recreates several interactions in German, only translating some of them; he also reproduces Slavic words, as well as terms proceeding from other languages such as Spanish and Greek. I believe he wanted to portrait and convey to the reader the communication void that shaped the camp society and was the cause of much suffering to many prisoners. As a translator, I struggled between, on the one hand, the semantic, source-text oriented translation strategy I deemed the text required and, on the other,

my desire to elaborate a comprehensible and straightforward edition for the Spanish-speaking readers. I finally came up with an acceptable solution: I determined to keep every loanword as Geve had reproduced it originally, but I decided to translate every significant foreign expression or multilingual interaction in a footnote. By doing so, I trust I have been able to respect the genuine narrative atmosphere of the text, though also allowing the reader to step out of Geve's literary universe and acquire further, factual knowledge about the camp experience.

This is the same principle I have followed regarding the author's childhood drawings, which depicted the daily routine in the camps. Both the Geve family and I believed it essential to include in the Spanish edition some of his illustrations, as we consider his memoir to be an intersemiotic document conveying the concentrationary experience through different codes of signification. His sketches include several statements and isolated words in German, which contribute to a better understanding of the concentrationary universe. Although the drawings show tremendous strength and truly speak for themselves, I thought the Spanish audience would embrace their meaning more profoundly if they could understand the actual German words. Therefore, I resolved to add a brief paragraph for each drawing with a straight translation and, furthermore, some supplementary information about the situation depicted. Definitively, concentrationary literature is intimately related to the German language, and any translator, no matter which one the source language may be, will have to deal with the language of the Nazi executioner. Victor Klemperer, a German Jewish professor, documented the deliberate degeneration of German language throughout the decade of National Socialist domination. He devoted *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (1947) to analyze how Nazi perpetrators manipulated and distorted Goethe's language as a crucial political strategy to accomplish their racist ideology and brainwash the population (24-25). In fact, this very unique language soaked into the *Lager* system, so any translator of concentrationary literature should have a solid grasp of Klemperer's research. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, reflecting on his experience in Auschwitz, Levi connected the language of the camps with Klemperer's work:

What I did not realize then—and came to realize only many years later—was that the German of the Lagers was a separate language. In German it was called *Orts- und Zeitgebunden*, place- and time-bound. It was a particularly barbarized variant of what the German Jewish philologist Victor Klemperer christened the *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, the language of the Third Reich, going so far as to propose the acrostic LTI, in ironic analogy with the hundred others so dear to the Germany of those years (NSDAP, SS, SA, SD, KZ, RKPA, WVHA, RSHA, BDM) (2015: 255).

Within the concentrationary universe, a whole new technical and administrative language flourished in German to refer to the unique structure of the camps (Aschenberg 2002: 549). These terms were often so specific and evocative that translators usually leave them in German. In fact, these neologisms appear frequently in survivors' memoirs, and any translator should understand their meanings and connotations to truly comprehend the concentrationary universe. Of course, translators need to acquire vast socio-historical knowledge to delve into the reality of the camps and be able to convey it in another language. I truly believe this understanding can only be obtained through deep research and, particularly, through the reading of numer-

ous memoirs written by survivors. By exploring the experiences of other deportees of different origins, translators can compose their own comparable corpus, which may allow them to discover intertextual connections and find precise and historically accurate coined equivalents for certain references. For instance, after having read several testimonies by German and Spanish survivors, I could easily identify the song summoned by Geve: “*Far and wide as the eye can wonder. Heath and bog are everywhere. Not a bird sings out to cheer us. Oaks are standing gaunt and bare*” (1987: 216). In 1933, in the Börgermoor concentration camp, established to incarcerate political opponents, Johannes Esser and Wolfgang Langhoff composed the German version of this hymn, *Das Moorsoldatenlied*, which was soon popularized throughout the concentrationary universe. The swamp song reconstructs a vivid portrait of the prisoners’ daily struggle—defined by isolation, forced labor, military columns, and the constant danger of death—and opposes them to the high hopes that kept deportees alive through the ordeal. Spanish Republicans evoke the Spanish version of the song frequently in their memoirs, and therefore I was able to quote it as follows: “*Todo cuanto el ojo abarca está muerto, no hay amor. Ni un pájaro nos alegra. Los robles desnudos nos dan temor*” (Geve 2020: 255). According to De la Ossa (2011), the Spanish rendition was written by Pi de la Serra and Pere Camps. This example demonstrates the tremendous relevance of documentation, a multifaceted practice that is parallel to the translation process.

As a genuine reality, the concentrationary experience embodies a singular universe that we can only hope to approximate by interweaving a myriad of memoirs and testimonies. On the other hand, translators must be ready to interpret intertextuality as a feature of each text. In this regard, Prescott (2010) has explored the productive use of imagery from Genesis in Holocaust memoirs, whose authors “find in the Biblical book the exact story or image by which to explicate their all but unimaginable experience” (1). Indeed, Thomas Geve follows this trend as he evokes the myth of the Tower of Babel (1987: 43) to convey his initial feelings about the camp’s linguistic chaos. According to Prescott (2010), drawing upon Scripture to mediate the experience is not a marginal phenomenon of Holocaust testimonies but a central issue for understanding them because “intertextuality creates a dynamic dialogue between the contemporary text and the ancient Hebraic work” (11-12). Therefore, in order to be able to convey this dialogue faithfully in another language, translators must also acquire knowledge about Scripture to comprehend the writing of Jewish survivors, since “the allusions shed light on both the Genesis text and the historical event of the Nazi genocide” (1).

Taking everything into consideration, it seems clear that Holocaust translators need to possess broad knowledge of the reality of the camps, Jewish background and multilingual skills that allow them to convey the uniqueness of the *Lagersprache*. However, apart from considering these background competences, it is also worth exploring whether certain specific translation techniques may apply genuinely to concentrationary literature. Faye Munyard (2016) has reflected thoroughly on this subject, which she considers crucial since “deforming tendencies within translations of Holocaust literature have general implications for our understanding of the complexity of Holocaust memories” (104). She believes that translations of survivors’ accounts contribute to the mythification of the Holocaust, as these translations traditionally engage in a discourse which appropriates Jewish history, demonstrating that the main purpose of translation is not the preservation of collective memory

and individual legacies, but one which is centered on having the target audience, predominantly Christian, understand the Holocaust from their own world view. In *Faithful Renderings*, Seidman has also emphasized the excessive dependence of Christianity on the translation of Jewish texts, including Holocaust narratives. As such, she claims that translation embodies a central subject to understand the relations between both religious communities and to unveil the “constructedness of Holocaust discourse” (2006: 201). Definitely, “translation opens up and enhances critical discourses linked to Holocaust Studies and demonstrates why it is necessary that the study of translation becomes a central consideration of Holocaust memorialization” (Faye Munyard 2016: 104).

In this regard, Munyard criticizes some linguistic and aesthetic alterations manifested frequently in translated Holocaust memoirs, which distance the target text from the original narrative. Essentially, she censures stylistic betrayal to the source text through syntactic expansions and rhetorical embellishment: “Broken syntax, marked by a scarcity of coordinating conjunctions exposes the fragmentary nature of Holocaust” and “conveys something, also, of the mechanical compulsion of events unfolding before the reader’s eyes” (2016: 91). Therefore, translators should not violate this narrative singularity by composing a more linguistically refined text. Geve’s writing is highly illustrative of the constant pressure deportees had to endure. For example, the compulsion of the camp routine is evoked by unembellished, fast-paced enumerations, which transmit the urgency and rush intrinsic to deportation: “Scenes of days gone by became vivid again –the arrival, the selection, the punishments, the food, the diseases, the endless rows of fences, the work, the roll calls, the winter, the revolts, the gallows, the evacuation, the *Katiushas*” (1987: 205). In my Spanish rendition, I opted for keeping the enumeration as bare as possible, so as to transmit the traumatic and obsessive nature of the concentrationary experience as Geve sought to do with his own words: “Las escenas de los días pasados se volvieron vívidas de nuevo: la llegada, la selección, los castigos, la comida, las enfermedades, los interminables recuentos, el trabajo, las revueltas, el invierno, el patíbulo, la horca, la evacuación, las *Katiushas*” (2020: 243).

According to Munyard (2016: 92), this accelerated narrative pace is also related to the authors’ tendency to repeat words and stress certain semantic fields. The compulsion to repeat is a way of re-experiencing trauma, which furthermore echoes one of the fundamental difficulties of narrating the Holocaust: the nonexistence of suitable lexicon. As such, translators need to respect this formal characteristic, since repetition within Holocaust narratives should “be read as symbolic of the dilemma of truthfully recounting and bearing witness” (93). For instance, when narrating the tragic decease of one of his friends, Geve uses and repeats in the same page several words related to death (1987: 98), all of which I have kept unaltered and literally translated in the Spanish rendition (2020: 132). On the whole, Munyard’s strongest disapproval towards Holocaust translations is connected to the destruction of underlying networks of significance, which epitomize essential tropes in the original texts: “Holocaust narratives contain networks of word-obsessions. After long, and sometimes, short intervals, readers witness the recurrence of certain words and certain kinds of substantives, which through their similarities or goals constitute a particular network” (94). Within concentrationary literature, animality and animal symbolism become ongoing allegories for dehumanization, used both by the perpetrator and the victim: Nazis used the animal discourse to deprive the deportees of their human

identity, and therefore perform their genocidal deeds without feeling remorse; prisoners, in turn, employed a parallel language to distance themselves from the Nazi executioner and from the other prisoners who succumbed to the moral contamination of the camp and hurt fellow inmates to survive –those deportees who, in the words of Primo Levi, surrendered to the *gray zone*, an obscure ethical dimension in which the border between the oppressor and the oppressed fades away (2015: 190). In this regard, it has already been pointed out that, to some extent, prisoners embraced the perpetrator's use of a dehumanized language, which constantly resorted to animal signifiers, as a kind of mimetic action (Goffman 1961: 63). In fact, Thomas Geve appeals significantly to the animal metaphor in a very noteworthy passage, in which he narrates being attacked by another prisoner:

The prison-garbed figure that had been lying on the other side of the heap came crawling my way. When he reached me, still not raising himself, he threw a stone. Seconds later he bit my wrist. The cruel ruthless teeth buried in my lean flesh were those of a madman: a human beast in search of loot, a prying animal . . . Before me was a being who . . . was a creature that for the sake of a slice of bread would have murdered me in my sleep. I hit back the way it deserved, kicking it in the stomach. The beast rolled back, defeated (1987: 165).

This episode epitomizes animal metaphorization, an underlying network of meaning that is highly persistent in concentrationary language. Following Munyard's beliefs on Holocaust translation, I deemed it necessary to keep in the Spanish version every single trace of this allegoric trope. In the original text, Thomas Geve deliberately chose the English pronoun used to refer to animals, instead of the one reserved for humans. Unfortunately, this grammatical distinction could not be literally transported to the Spanish language, so I opted for a linguistic expansion as a compensation strategy. Throughout the rest of the passage, I resolved to use lexicon related to the semantic field of animals, so as to respect the author's original network of meaning and rhetorical atmosphere:

Una figura con ropa de prisionero se arrastraba hacia mí desde el otro lado del montón de basura. Cuando me alcanzó, sin tan siquiera erguirse, me lanzó una piedra. Segundos más tarde, me mordió la muñeca. La dentadura cruel y despiadada que se hundía en mi piel desnuda era la de un demente: una bestia humana en busca de un botín, un animal de presa . . . Se había convertido en una criatura capaz de asesinarme mientras dormía por una rebanada de pan. Le devolví el golpe al animal como se merecía, propinándole una patada en el estómago. La bestia se retiró, derrotada (Geve 2020: 201).

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

Throughout these pages, I have tried to critically reflect on my own experience facing the translation of a concentration camp memoir. I believe that Holocaust translators partake in the authors' *skopos*: just like survivors are committed to revealing the truth, lending their voices to the unspoken victims, translators hope to shape and endorse collective memory, therefore manifesting their ethical engagement. Trans-

lating Holocaust testimonies is a highly complicated affair, requiring broad socio-historical knowledge and, furthermore, multilingual proficiency, since concentration camp memoirs are usually rooted in an extremely polyglot environment. Being able to grasp underlying networks of significance, to capture the essence of the linguistic singularity of the concentration camp, and to understand and convey intertextual relations is an extraordinarily complicated endeavor. The concentrationary universe incarnates one of the most ruthless and brutal episodes in European contemporary history, and therefore the translation of personal memoirs entails a weighty responsibility, as translation becomes a significant means of preserving and broadening historical memory.

In 2020, survivors keep telling and publishing new stories; other texts that were published long ago, such as Geve's, keep being translated into different languages. Holocaust translation is by no means an obsolescent matter, but actually a prevailing and current subject. Certain survivors, such as Primo Levi, Imre Kertész, Jorge Semprún, or Elie Wiesel have become renowned, prolific authors, who have substantially contributed to the perpetuation of the Holocaust memory. However, there are countless other fairly unknown witnesses who have also borne testimony and whose voices remain relatively unheard. Only by listening to each survivor's truth and own story can we hope to approach the concentrationary experience and understand its universal significance, which still echoes in our current societies.

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