

## **“The Earth Does Not Want to Keep Secrets”:**

### ***Vasily Grossman and Rachel Auerbach in the Fields of Treblinka***

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This article examines two pioneering texts written by Jewish authors who developed an early material-environmental approach to the death camp of Treblinka: Vasily Grossman (1944) and Rachel Auerbach (1947). Both writers visited Treblinka right after the war and found themselves compelled to solicit the assistance of nonhuman testimony—the natural environment, everyday objects, and human remains—which they transformed into witnesses to a new species of crimes. Their interest in materiality led them to develop an archaeological approach to the death camp Treblinka. The article seeks to illuminate each author’s embryonic materialistic approach. I ask what led them to take this freshly forged path, how their treatment of human remains, everyday objects and the natural environment converged and diverged, and how their texts may offer possible solutions to ethical and theoretical dilemmas raised by contemporary material and forensic approaches to the Holocaust.

#### INTRODUCTION

*The Zone of Interest* (2023) is one of the most recent attempts to grapple with the question of how, and whether, the Holocaust can be represented and captured in an artistic form. The director, Jonathan Glazer, chose to address this dilemma by creating a movie about Auschwitz that refrains

from directly depicting the horrors that took place inside the death camp, the systematic murder of over a million Jews during the Holocaust. The film mostly restricts itself to the everyday life of the commandant of Auschwitz Rudolf Höss, his wife Hedwig and their five children, who lived in a villa with a garden and a pool alongside the camp. Rather than attempting to show the atrocities themselves, Glazer chose to represent them primarily through the sounds of screams, shouts, trains and gunshots, which form a haunting background throughout the film.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the victims maintain a material presence that resists the denial and concealment of their genocide. They appear in the film through the dark smoke from the crematorium, the cremated ashes that fertilize the soil of the garden, human remains that float downstream in the Soła River while Höss and his children swim, the red glow beyond the windows and the blood that has to be washed from the commandant's boots. The Höss family collects material objects that are stolen from the Jewish victims, from fur coats and lipstick to gold teeth. It seems as if everyday objects, human remains, indeed nature itself, bear witness to the Holocaust, transgressing the boundaries that were meant to isolate the perpetrators from the reality of their crimes.

In this sense, *The Zone of Interest* may be seen as emblematic of the “material turn” in Holocaust historiography and litigation in the 1990s, signifying the end of the “era of the witness.”<sup>2</sup> Foreseeing the approaching death of the last survivors, Holocaust scholars and litigators increasingly turned their attention to material objects, seeing in them “silent witnesses” to the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> Technology has also been harnessed, and archives of recorded testimonies by Holocaust survivors have been created since the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> In law, this turn manifested itself in the decline of criminal trials and a wave of restitution lawsuits in national and transnational tribunals.<sup>5</sup> These changes have been accompanied by a growing reliance on technology and the birth of the new interdisciplinary field of “forensic archaeology”—a practice that turns the former killing fields and Nazi concentration camps, particularly in eastern Europe, into archaeological sites where material evidence of human remains are sought in newly discovered mass graves and new technologies are routinely applied to identify them.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, there is a growing literature that goes back to early writings and memoirs of the Holocaust to expose material sensitivities and engagement with the natural environment.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, according to Bożena Shallcross, the “material turn” in analysis of the Holocaust is not recent but can be traced to writers both during and immediately after the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> An unprecedented inversion of values, indeed the reversal of the traditional dichotomy between human

subject and material object engendered by Nazi criminality, induced certain Polish Jewish and Polish Catholic authors to invent a new materialistic language to bear witness to their own degradation and deaths (Władysław Szlengel and Zuzanna Ginczanka), to memorialize (Czesław Miłosz), to represent dehumanization in a death camp (Tadeusz Borowski), and to illuminate a forensic investigation (Zofia Nałkowska).<sup>1</sup>[give references] In their hands, mundane material objects, the decomposition of natural matter, and the waste product of human corpses were transformed into witnesses to the rupture in civilization produced by Nazism. Hence, a “material turn” has been evident in Holocaust texts since the Holocaust itself.

While *The Zone of Interest* focuses on the material and spatial dimensions concerning Auschwitz, which has become a symbol of Nazi horrors, Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 documentary film *Shoah* returns to the sites of Operation Reinhard death camps such as Belzec, Treblinka and Sobibor, which remained relatively overlooked by the research for many years.<sup>9</sup> His film pioneered what has come to be known as the geographical or environmental approach to Holocaust historiography.<sup>10</sup> Lanzmann’s insistence on the unrepresentability of the horrors of the Shoah led him to abstain from using images of the past. Instead, the film juxtaposes interviews of survivors, witnesses and perpetrators with the present-day landscapes that often look pastoral and carry little traces of the past. This creates a disturbing effect. Lanzmann described *Shoah* as a “film from the ground up, a topographical film, a geographical film.” He explained: “The sites I saw were disfigured, effaced. They were non-sites of memory.”<sup>11</sup> Critics argue that Lanzmann saw the scarring of the sites he and his team filmed as having the same indexical quality as the psychic damage done to his survivor interviewees.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zofia Nałkowska, *Medallions*, Evanston Ill, 2000 (trans. Diana Kuprel); Władysław Szlengel, W. (1987 [1943]). *What I read to the dead: Poems of the Warsaw Ghetto* [in Hebrew]. (H. Birnbaum, Trans.). Tel Aviv: Traklin; Zuzanna Ginczanka, (2012). *Little star* (I. Grudzińska-Gross, A. Pramik, & G. Cebula, Trans.); Czesław Miłosz, *The Collected Poems 1931-1987* (Penguin, 1988); Tadeusz Borowski, *Here in Our Auschwitz and Other Stories* (T. Snyder trans., 2021).

This article examines two pioneering texts written by Jewish authors who developed an early material-environmental approach to the death camp of Treblinka (Treblinka II), located on Polish soil 50 miles (80 km) northeast of Warsaw: “Treblinskii ad” (The hell of Treblinka), published in 1944 by Soviet Jewish journalist and writer Vasily Grossman in the wake of the liberation of eastern Poland, and *Oyf di felder fun treblinke* (In the fields of Treblinka), published in 1947 by Polish Jewish writer and historian Rachel Auerbach, who visited the former grounds of Treblinka a few months after the end of World War II as part of a Polish forensic delegation of inquiry.<sup>13</sup>

Grossman and Auerbach arrived at Treblinka at different times. He arrived with Soviet troops in September 1944, and she arrived fourteen months later, on November 7, 1945. They shared similar goals: to collect the testimonies of survivors and other eyewitnesses and report to the world what had happened there. But both writers found themselves compelled to solicit the assistance of nonhuman testimony—the natural environment, everyday objects, and human remains—which through their eyes and in their hands became witnesses to a new species of crimes: for Grossman, crimes against humanity; for Auerbach, genocide (of the Jewish people).

Forensic archaeologist Caroline Sturdy Colls observes that “[d]uring the Holocaust, attempts were made by victims and witnesses to alert the wider world to the crimes perpetrated by burying or hiding physical evidence.”<sup>14</sup> Grossman and Auerbach undertook to transform such material objects into forensic evidence of a colossal crime. Moreover, their special interest in materiality led them to develop a kind of archaeological approach to death camps in an attempt to reconstruct Treblinka’s physical structure and social history through clues and traces buried in the ground. In this article I seek to illuminate each author’s embryonic materialistic approach to the death camp of Treblinka. I ask what led these two authors to take this freshly forged path, how their treatment of human remains, everyday objects and the natural environment converged and diverged—Auerbach read Grossman’s book and it provided her with a model, but she changed it in important ways—and how their texts prefigure and offer possible solutions to ethical and theoretical dilemmas raised by contemporary material and forensic approaches to the Holocaust.

Grossmann's and Auerbach's contribution to contemporary discourse on Holocaust memorialization and historiography should be seen within the context of the broader discussions on the ethical dilemmas raised by the material turn that developed in the last three decades in the social sciences and the humanities.<sup>15</sup> These writings adopt a post-humanist approach that recognizes the quasi-agency of nonhuman objects and the natural environment. Janet Bennet has explored the vitality of nonhuman objects, which she defines as "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."<sup>16</sup> According to Bennett, to recognize the vitality of matter does not mean to anthropomorphize nonhuman objects or to attribute to them human intentions but rather to challenge our sole reliance on human subjectivity: "Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations."<sup>17</sup>

For scholars of the Holocaust, a neomaterial or ecological approach to historiography therefore has the potential to highlight important aspects of the Nazi crimes, such as the blurring of the distinction between objects and human subjects, the inversion of value between them, and a radical process of commodification. However, the concern that a post-humanist approach may repeat the dehumanization that informed the worldview of the Nazi perpetrators has been aroused, for example, by the writings of Eva Domańska, who regards the decomposition of corpses in mass graves not only as "degradation" but as part of natural processes of inclusion and integration in a larger ecological system.<sup>18</sup> Matilda Mroz argues that such an approach poses a difficult dilemma to Holocaust researchers and suggests that contemporary technologies of forensic archaeology of death camps and mass graves be understood as creating a sort of "material archive" of the crimes committed there.<sup>19</sup> These scholars endeavor to incorporate inanimate objects and nature itself into Holocaust research by expanding our concept of witnessing.<sup>20</sup>

Environmental approaches to Holocaust history share the neomaterialist attempt to bring non-human actors into their research by examining the influence of the environment on the Holocaust and exploring the use of nature in Holocaust memory.<sup>21</sup> However, they also pose an ethical challenge, as formulated by Tim Cole: "How to steer a line between making a claim that nature matters without being misread as either excusing human behavior on the part of the perpetrators, or downplaying human experience on the part of the victims."<sup>22</sup> The solution he

suggests is to adopt the approach taken by Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander when facing the challenge of how to write “a historical account of the Holocaust in which the policies of the perpetrators, the attitudes of surrounding society, and the world of the victims could be addressed within an integrated framework.”<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding the disparities of power between perpetrators and victims, Friedlander saw the very act of bringing them together as part of an integrated history of the Holocaust as “an opportunity to challenge dominant assumptions about who exercised power during the Holocaust, seeing the potential for victims’ voices to ‘puncture’ the historical narrative developed from other sources and perspectives.”<sup>24</sup> Cole argues that contemporary Holocaust historiography faces a similar ethical challenge in trying to overcome the divide between human and nonhuman actors without undermining the responsibility of perpetrators or the suffering of victims.

In accordance with the material turn in Holocaust research, historians have begun to consider the material aspects of Nazi death camps such as Treblinka in an attempt to expand their investigation beyond perpetrators and victims to include the perspectives of Polish locals who lived nearby. Such studies include Jan Gross’s *Golden Harvest* (2012), which documents and discusses the practice of Polish grave-diggers in Treblinka after the war.<sup>25</sup> However, the most important contemporary expansion of historical sources on Treblinka was the result of an archaeological shift. Sturdy Colls observes that archaeological research and fieldwork have been conducted in “all of the Nazi death camps—Belżec, Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor and Auschwitz-Birkenau—as well as a range of concentration and labor camps.”<sup>26</sup> She herself led an archaeological investigation at the former Treblinka extermination and labor camps and uncovered the physical remnants of gas chambers, delineated the camp layout and created computer models of how the camp once looked.<sup>27</sup>

These developments shed new light on the early texts by Grossman and Auerbach. As primarily literary writers, their embryonic archaeological investigation of Treblinka did not shy away from the difficult theoretical and ethical questions that contemporary ecological and post-humanist theories present to Holocaust historiography and memory. Their descriptions were based not only on what they saw but also, and more significantly, on the thoughts, reflections and flights of imagination that were invoked by what they saw and heard. Returning to their early texts with new theoretical insights allows us to identify the divergent ways in which each developed a

materialistic approach that transforms inanimate objects and the earth itself into witnesses to Treblinka while resisting the dehumanization that stands at the core of the Nazi worldview and crimes.

#### VASILY GROSSMAN AND “THE HELL OF TREBLINKA”

When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Grossman volunteered for the Red Army. From August 1941 to August 1945, he was a correspondent for the army’s main newspaper, *Krasnaia zvezda* (Red Star) and spent nearly three years following the Soviet troops along the eastern front, witnessing and documenting the terrible effects of war and genocide.<sup>28</sup> After he arrived at Treblinka with Soviet troops in September 1944, he promptly recorded his impressions in “The Hell of Treblinka,” first published in November 1944 in *Znamia* (The Banner), a Russian literary magazine whose writers were associated with the Red Army. The piece was subsequently published in book form by a Soviet publisher in 1945.<sup>29</sup> He wrote this essay and all his other works in Russian for a general Russian-speaking audience. It was later submitted as evidence in the Nuremberg trials.<sup>30</sup>

In their biography of Grossman, John and Carol Garrard state that the basis for the essay was forty interviews that Grossman conducted with witnesses, including Jewish survivors, located by Red Army officers.<sup>31</sup> But Grossman makes direct reference to only a handful of Jewish interviewees, and only two by name, Max Levit from Treblinka I and Abram Kon, a barber.<sup>32</sup> This is understandable, since most Jewish survivors were long gone by the late summer of 1944.<sup>33</sup> Grossman also spoke to a few captured Ukrainian guards (*Wächmannen*) and local Poles.<sup>34</sup> The fact that he barely invokes these testimonies in his text indicates that he wanted to understand more about the vast destruction of human life that he confronted at Treblinka than what he could simply learn from talking to human witnesses. For him, it was primarily what he observed with his own eyes, the material features of the camp, particularly nature, that enabled him to fully grasp what Treblinka was, what it represented and what it forbode for humanity.<sup>35</sup>

Earth

Throughout the essay, Grossman shows how the Germans did their utmost to transform the earth into a complicit accessory to their crime, violating it in the process. Secreted in the earth were skulls, bone fragments, and ashes of Treblinka's hundreds of thousands of victims; the ground was strewn with the victims' countless personal belongings. Joanna Krongold argues that Grossman turned nature and the nonhuman into a "literary tool" that allows him to broaden the possibilities for representing the Holocaust beyond human testimony. This article takes this approach a step further and examines how Grossman (and later Auerbach) recognize the complicity of nature but also show how it could be turned into a moral witness to the Nazi crimes.<sup>36</sup> In Grossman's portrayal, the scarred landscape becomes a nonhuman, organic witness. He describes how the perpetrators used a huge excavator to dig vast grave pits in the sandy soil from morning till evening. The pits were hundreds of meters long and many meters deep (HT 137, 146). After his visit to Treblinka in February 1943, Heinrich Himmler ordered to have all the corpses disinterred and burned and their ashes and cinders removed and scattered across the fields and roads. For this purpose, the excavator dug another pit, 250 to 300 meters long, 20 to 25 meters wide, and 6 meters deep. Reinforced concrete pillars, 100 to 120 centimeters high, were inserted into the earth; they supported giant steel beams that ran the entire length of the pit. Rails that were spaced five to seven centimeters apart were then laid across these beams. As Grossman writes, "All this constituted a gigantic grill." The earth was transformed into a colossal crematorium for the hundreds of thousands of corpses of innocent victims (HT 148).

"For thirteen months, from July 1942 the executioner's block had been at work, and for thirteen months from August 1943, the Germans had been trying to obliterate every trace of this work" (HT 159). However, when Grossman arrives there in September 1944, the earth demonstrates its resistance and refuses to be part of the perpetrators' deception: "Today the witnesses have spoken: the stones and the earth have cried out aloud" (HT 123). He writes further: "And now the very earth of Treblinka refuses to be an accomplice to the crimes the monsters committed. It is casting up everything that Hitler's people tried to bury within it." The earth exhibits agency: it literally moves. As Grossman and the soldiers of the Red Army tread on the ground, "the earth sways beneath our feet—earth of Treblinka, bottomless earth, earth as unsteady as the sea. This wilderness behind a barbed-wire fence has swallowed more human lives than all the earth's oceans and seas have swallowed since the birth of mankind" (HT 159). The earth has been transformed in Grossman's perception from *terra firma*, solid ground, into a sea; the sea

eventually disgorges and ejects to the surface whatever has been cast into it, either intentionally or accidentally.

Thus, in Grossman's hands, the earth becomes a "moral witness." According to Sara Horowitz, the moral witness "has an ethical function ... fulfilling a moral obligation to the dead, who cannot speak for themselves and whose suffering and murder would be suppressed without the survivor relating it." In her view, "the most powerful ethical call of their accounts [is] a confrontation with radical dehumanization, evil, and suffering that cannot be easily absorbed or explained."<sup>37</sup> This is precisely the role that Grossman assigns to the earth and how he understood his own role. In October 1944, at a meeting of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee's literary commission to discuss *The Black Book*—a compilation of evidence and eyewitness testimonies on the Holocaust on Soviet soil edited by Grossman and the writer Ilya Ehrenburg—Grossman asserted it was his and his colleagues' "responsibility of speaking on behalf of those who lie in the earth and cannot speak for themselves."<sup>38</sup>

The Nazis' endeavor to conquer Europe and annihilate the Jews was underpinned by an ideological project to lay claim to the earth and then rid it of unwanted people by killing them and hiding their remains in that very same earth. Jews may have been their main victims but, for Grossman, the crime transcended the specific identity of the victims because nature is the birthright, the patrimony of every human being; thus, a gross violation of nature concerns every human being.<sup>39</sup> Grossman named this novum a "crime against humanity" (117) using this term almost a year before this new species of criminal offense was codified in the 1945 London Charter, which laid the foundation for the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg.<sup>40</sup>

In Grossman's account, nature, this inanimate moral witness, exhibits emotions. "It is quiet." This is Grossman's initial impression when he sets foot in Treblinka. Fragile lupines dot the landscape; a faint touch will make their pods burst. "The sounds of the falling peas and the bursting pods come together to form a single soft, sad melody. It is as if a funeral knell—a barely audible, sad, broad, peaceful tolling—is being carried to us from the very depths of the earth." The earth, suffering from "unhealing wounds" and "splitting apart," is in mourning, lamenting the killing of the hundreds of thousands whose corpses are buried in its subterranean bowels.

Human remains

Ashes —the fine bone dust—from the corpses cremated over the grill pits provided Grossman with the first clue. Tons of cinders and ashes were removed from the grounds of Treblinka by Polish peasants from the nearby village of Wólka, who were ordered to load them onto their carts and scatter them on the road leading from the death camp to the labor camp. The cinders and ashes had a significant impact on the earth. “The ashes made the road black, like a mourning ribbon,” observes Grossman, “Car wheels make a peculiar swishing sound on this road” (HT 153).

Grossman pays close attention to the perpetrators’ commodification of the victims’ bodies. He is told of the SS-created detachment of prisoners who were ordered to extract gold and platinum teeth from the mouths of victims pulled from the gas chambers and then sort them according to value and ship them in boxes to Germany. He adds sardonically that if the SS had found it more convenient or advantageous to extract the teeth of living victims, they would have done so without hesitation, just as they had women’s hair cut while they were still alive. “But,” Grossman writes, “it was evidently easier and more convenient to extract people’s teeth when they were dead” (HT 145). Indeed, of all the human remains he encountered, women’s hair seems to have made the greatest impression on him. Women’s hair was removed by Jewish barbers acting under duress in the women’s barrack before women were dispatched to the gas chamber. Grossman asks for what purpose the Germans used the hair, which was shipped to Germany. No one knows for sure. To stuff mattresses? According to a Jewish prisoner’s written deposition, they used it make hawsers for submarines (HT 132). Near the end of his essay, Grossman describes a dramatic moment when he spots hair on the ground:

We walk over the swaying, bottomless earth of Treblinka and suddenly come to a stop. Thick wavy hair gleaming like burnished copper, the delicate lovely hair of a young woman, trampled into the ground; and beside it, some equally fine blond hair; and then some heavy black plaits on the bright sand; and them more and more.... Evidently, these are the contents of a sack, just a single sack that somehow got left behind. Yes, it is all true. The last hope, the last wild hope that it was all just a terrible dream, has gone. (HT 160)

The scattered remains of hair, evidently women’s hair, for Grossman a quintessential expression of human beauty, trampled into the defiled earth of Treblinka, were for him the final straw, the ultimate proof of the unredeemable crimes committed in that factory of death, which processed

and recirculated the remains of murdered human beings. As he chillingly noted: “The officials in charge of Treblinka took pride and joy in the fact that, in terms of power, handling capacity, and production floor space, this would far surpass the other SS death factories” (HT 141).

### Personal belongings

Apart from the victims’ human remains, Grossman discovered a wide array of their personal belongings strewn over the ruined grounds of Treblinka. Material objects are another kind of moral witness, indicating what was important to, even treasured by, the victims.

While new arrivals were being led to the gas chamber, Grossman explains, Jewish forced laborers who were members of the “blue squad” (so named because they wore blue armbands) collected, sorted and appraised the victims’ personal belongings for the use of their German masters. The prisoners were under tremendous pressure. “It takes real skill to sort out, in the course of only a few minutes,” Grossman writes. “Everything of value is to be sent to Germany; everything old, valueless, and shabby is to be burned.... Workers were not given the chance to make more than one mistake” (HT 129).

“The Hell of Treblinka” includes two long lists of these personal belongings, which are mostly everyday items. An inversion of “value” occurs already during their sorting:

Items of value were already being taken away to the storerooms, while the letters, the yellowed wedding announcements, the photographs of newborn babies, brothers, and brides; all the thousands of little things that were infinitely precious to their owners yet the merest trash to the masters of Treblinka were being gathered into heaps and taken away to vast pits already containing hundreds of thousands of similar letters, postcards, visiting cards, photographs, and sheets of paper in children’s scribble or children’s first clumsy drawings in crayon. (HT 130)

Grossman does not refer to Jewish objects directly, but in the first list he includes prayer shawls and violins (HT 129). While prayer shawls are obviously Jewish objects, violins are often associated with Jews since playing the violin was popular in Jewish communities in both eastern

and western Europe, and Jews frequently took their violins with them when fleeing from home or being deported to camps.<sup>41</sup>

In a powerful passage near the end of “The Hell of Treblinka,” Grossman creates another list to describe the resurfacing of victims’ personal belongings from the earth’s depths, which he himself observed:

And from the earth’s unhealing wounds, from this earth that is splitting apart, things are escaping of their own accord. Here they are: the half-rotted shirts of those who were murdered, their trousers and shoes, their cigarette cases that have turned green, along with little cogwheels from watches, penknives, shaving brushes, candlesticks, a child’s shoes with red pompoms, embroidered towels from the Ukraine, lace underwear, scissors, thimbles, corsets, and bandages ... as if all that the Germans had buried was being pushed up out of the swollen, bottomless earth, as if someone’s hand were pushing it all out into the light of day.... And over all this reigns a terrible smell of decay, a smell that neither fire, nor sun, nor rain, nor snow, nor wind have been able to overcome. And thousands of little forest flies are crawling about over all these half-rotted bits and pieces, over all these papers and photographs.<sup>42</sup>(HT 159–160)

Grossman notices the semi-agency of the earth, pushing out the incriminating remnants of a crime. Listing these mundane objects also captures the humanity of their owners and highlights the enormity of the crime. Although he does not know the victims’ names, he deliberately emphasizes personal items bearing the imprint of the human touch, in which the human drama in all its facets is embedded. Grossman himself dug items out of the grounds of Treblinka, including a baby’s pacifier and child’s shoe, which obviously touched him deeply, as he mentioned discovering these items at a meeting of the presidium of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in 1946.<sup>43</sup>

However, lists in and of themselves have another function in the text; they represent rupture. Integral to this rupture is robbery not only of material objects but also of human beings’ right to live. They are part and parcel of the same event, two crimes unified by the same impulse. Indeed, the paragraph in which Grossman imagines the final moments of the victims in the gas chambers of Treblinka is permeated by the notion of robbery:

First people were robbed of their freedom, their home, and their motherland.... Then, on the square by the station, they were robbed of their belongings, of their personal letters and of photographs of their loved ones. After going through the fence, a man was robbed of his mother, his wife, and his child. After he had been stripped naked, his papers were thrown onto a fire; he had been robbed of his name. He was driven into a corridor with a low stone ceiling; now he had been robbed of the sky, the stars, the wind, and the sun.

Then came the last act of the human tragedy—a human being was now in the last circle of the Hell of Treblinka.

The door of the concrete chamber slammed shut. The door was secured by every possible kind of fastening: by locks, by hooks, by a massive bolt. It was not a door that could be broken down. (HT 144)

In contemplation of the door of the gas chamber “slammed shut,” Grossman’s narrative breaks down. His narrative seems momentarily to have collapsed and all that Grossman is left with is the quintessential urtext—lists of everyday material objects, which he uses to humanize their owners and restore to them, even if only partially, what the Germans had robbed them of—their humanity.<sup>44</sup>

#### RACHEL AUERBACH IN THE FIELDS OF TREBLINKA

Grossman’s “The Hell of Treblinka” was published in Yiddish in Buenos Aires in April 1946 under the title *Treblinkaer gehenem* alongside Jankiel Wiernik’s memoir, *A yor in treblinke* (A year in Treblinka).<sup>45</sup> A Polish translation was also published in 1946.<sup>46</sup> Rachel Auerbach, a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto (whose inhabitants were exterminated at Treblinka), probably read this translation. In the ghetto Auerbach had joined the clandestine archive *Oyneg Shabes* under the leadership of historian Emmanuel Ringelblum, a victims’ initiative to document the history of their own annihilation and to prepare evidence for postwar justice.<sup>47</sup> Before the end of the war she and other survivor-historians established the Central Jewish Historical Commission (Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna, CŻKH), and began collecting and compiling evidence and testimonies of Holocaust victims.<sup>48</sup>

Auerbach arrived at the Treblinka death camp with an official Polish delegation of inquiry on November 7, 1945, under the auspices of the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland. Although the commission's investigation focused on collecting testimonies from surviving prisoners and the analysis of railroad records, it also sent a delegation to the site of the death camp to conduct a limited excavation in search of corroborating material evidence.<sup>49</sup> The delegation was headed by a judge, Zdzisław Łukaszkiewicz, and comprised a local prosecutor, licensed surveyor, press photographer, local officials, five Treblinka survivors and Rachel Auerbach and Józef Kermisz (Kermish) of the CŻKH. The delegation produced an official report, while Kermisz wrote a report for the CŻKH (FT 27).<sup>50</sup> But Auerbach wrote her own account in Yiddish, *Oyf di felder fun treblinke: Reportazsh* (In the fields of Treblinka: Reportage), which was published in 1947 by the CŻKH.<sup>51</sup>

Like Grossman before her, Auerbach went to Treblinka to see for herself the place from which no one had been supposed to return and to write an account of her visit to inform the world of what had transpired there. While in the ghetto, she had already recorded the testimony of one of the first escapees from Treblinka to return to Warsaw, Abraham Krzepicki.<sup>52</sup> But she herself was not a survivor of Treblinka and could not give firsthand testimony of what had occurred there. By visiting the physical site of Treblinka and reporting on what she saw, she turned herself into a secondary witness to the camp.<sup>53</sup>

### The road to Treblinka

The road to Treblinka. Here it is, the saddest of all roads ever to be trod by Jews....

When we revisited Treblinka, maybe we, too, should have gone there by train, or perhaps even walked, like pious pilgrims to a sacred shrine, reliving every stage of the Jewish death march, but the milestones of that particular Golgotha have yet to be set in place. At this point, we were not yet going to Treblinka to pay homage to our dead; we were going there only with a commission of inquiry to inspect the site. (FT 24)

Between the alternatives of complete identification with the Jewish victims and a ritualized religious commemoration, Auerbach considered the legal approach of a forensic examination as offering a transitional space. The legal investigation examined the remains of the past with an eye

to a future criminal trial; its procedures and processes allowed Auerbach to gain some perspective by focusing on hard evidence, trying to put into words what seems at first beyond good and evil (FT 39).

Auerbach herself inhabited a hybrid position in the delegation. She was both insider and outsider, part of an official delegation but not a formal legal expert.<sup>54</sup> As a survivor, she identified with Treblinka's Jewish victims and sought to give voice to their viewpoints. Although part of a forensic criminal investigation she turned herself into an anthropologist of sorts, as if embarking on a study of remote tribes. She relied on the knowledge of "local informants" (Treblinka survivors) with whom she could communicate. However, alongside their testimonies, she turned to material evidence, trying to decipher the strange and unknown "material culture" she encountered at Treblinka. She examined the remains and ruins like an archaeologist of an ancient past. Thus, for example, she noticed the local Polish looters who desecrated dead bodies for material gain. She describes how plunderers with shovels overran the grounds of Treblinka: "They dig, search and ransack; they sift the sand, they drag parts of half-rotted corpses from the earth, bones and scattered refuse in the hope that they may come upon at least a coin or a gold tooth." (FT 69)<sup>55</sup>

#### Nature as moral witness

To decipher the post-apocalyptic world of the death camp Treblinka, she resorted to two types of witnesses—human and nonhuman. The human witnesses, Treblinka's former prisoners—she ironically refers to them as *di treblinkier* ("the men from Treblinka")—were rendered mute when they reentered the site (FT 65). Hence, Auerbach turned to nonhuman witnesses—the earth, pine trees, the sky—for help. Nature provided her with a first key to decoding Treblinka's secrets. The fog that suddenly descended on a clear and sunny day as the delegation approached Treblinka indicated that something was amiss, as did the earth, which was full of pits and moved under her feet like shifting sands. As in Grossman's text, nature is humanized and mourns the countless murdered in Treblinka:

A leaden fog hung so low in the sky that it seemed as if we would be able to reach out and touch it. The milky-gray fog filled up the entire space. The pine trees stood out from a

distance as if shrouded in black veils. The sun had become pale and dim; it looked like a small, round human face gazing down at us from above, like the twisted, suddenly-aged face of someone newly bereaved. (FT 66–67)

Auerbach highlights the ethical stance of nature by contrasting it to those “human hyenas,” local Poles, who were willing to overcome the cultural taboo of desecrating the dead, and to the ease with which the perpetrators, “*ordinary, simple, normal Germans who, with the self-awareness and calm deliberation of respectable functionaries of the state, committed the most heinous crimes ever perpetrated in this world*” (FT 42).<sup>56</sup>

Nature functions not just as a metaphor in Auerbach’s text. The title of her book, *In the Fields of Treblinka*, is meant to direct attention to the ways that the Germans used nature as camouflage for their crimes: “While the Germans were still here, the whole area was plowed up and sown with lupine grass. And the lupine grass really grew and covered the whole surface with a green mask. It looked as if all the traces of the crime had been wiped away” (FT 70). Auerbach explodes this idyllic image to reveal the horrors it conceals. She explains that the attempt to use nature as camouflage began early on, when the Germans forced some of the Jewish prisoners of the Sonderkommando to manufacture deception:

The most important of all the details throughout was the “camouflage detail.” Its function was to cut down branches in the woods and interweave them into the barbed wire fences. It was forbidden to come closer than one kilometer to these fences. In the fall of 1942, the field of mass graves, which was surrounded with pine trees, came to be referred to humorously as the “Kindergarten.” The purpose of the trees was to hide the interior of the camp from outside observers. (FT 58)

However, when Auerbach arrived at Treblinka in November 1945, she found the earth covered with holes and pits: “Not one level place in the whole area. Everything had been torn up and dug up. Little hills and holes.” Ironically, it was the local diggers’ use of explosives in search of Jewish valuables (“treasures”) that undermined the German attempt to create a “perfect crime” without a body. The bones and parts of human bodies were scattered around the grounds, alongside everyday objects. The earth “yields up its secrets” (FT 70).

## Everyday objects

Auerbach's text initiated a method of inquiry that combines legal, anthropological and archaeological approaches, known today as "forensic archaeology."<sup>57</sup> As Sturdy Colls and Michael Branthwaite, archaeologists who excavated Treblinka between 2008 and 2018, explain: "The significant amount of physical evidence that actually survived can be used to tell and retell the site's history and victims' experiences as well as reveal spatial trends and insights into the camp's architecture and organization."<sup>58</sup> While standard forensic investigation focuses on finding evidence for a crime, forensic archaeology uses the remains of the material culture on the site to reconstruct the experiences of the victims and the perpetrators and the structure of the camp. The legal inquiry, as described by Auerbach, resembles an archaeological investigation of ancient objects excavated from the ground. Auerbach directs her readers' attention to the objects divulged by the earth, and like Grossman, she enumerates them in a list: "Aluminum kettles and pans, enameled tin pots—blackened, dented, full of holes. Combs with teeth broken off, half-rotted soles from ladies' summer sandals, broken mirrors, leather billfolds. All this is near the station platform where the camp's first barbed wire fences had been." She specifically refers to the value of these objects as legal evidence: "Here was the *physical evidence*; here were the *corpora delicti*." She explains that these were "[r]emnants of the huge piles of Jewish property which had been packed up and sent away, incinerated, cleared off, and yet still could not be completely cleared away" (FT 70–71).

Since the industrial death in Treblinka was accompanied by systematic looting, Auerbach, like Grossmann, deliberately blurs the legal distinction between murder (of human beings) and theft (of their objects), collapsing them both under one encompassing category of "robbery": "It was not enough that they robbed the Jews of their lives and all else they possessed, including what was left of their bodies. They robbed them even of their last bit of human dignity, of their last right to human respect. *Total robbery! Total murder! Total brutality!*" (FT 25). Like Grossman, she likens Treblinka to a death factory—meaning that the robbery made death in Treblinka "productive." It was a place of complete commodification—the looting and recirculation of clothes, the everyday possessions and valuables of the murdered, the women's hair that was shorn, and the gold teeth that were extracted from dead bodies (FT 32).

A second list of objects that Auerbach composes helps identify the victims as Jewish:

Twisted Sabbath candlesticks—enough for whole collections. A scrap from a prayer shawl. Just dug out of the ground, lying white and fresh, complete with a blue Star of David, is an elegant Warsaw armband (from the corner of Karmelick and Leszno—the latest fashion in the ghetto). A whole pile of ladies' marriage wigs. (FT 71)

Suspicious of the tendency of universalizing language of humanity to obscure the Jewish particularity of the crime, Auerbach adopted the particularistic expression “crime against the Jews” (FT 22, 34, 68). The Jewish cultural objects that she identified evoke Raphael Lemkin’s conceptualization of genocide, which recognizes the centrality of cultural genocide, and Grossman’s description of the uniqueness of the Nazi crimes against the Jews in “Ukraine without Jews.”<sup>59</sup> Auerbach viewed the crime as a systematic attempt to annihilate a group of people and their cultural identity. For this reason, she referred to the Jewish objects she found on the ground as remnants of the Jewish inheritance (FT 70).<sup>60</sup>

By defining the crime in particularistic terms (a crime against the Jews and Judaism) and identifying with the victims, Auerbach risked undermining her position as an “objective” investigator. However, she believed that her membership in the victim group allowed her to better interpret the meaning of the everyday objects she found (down to the street in Warsaw where fashionable cloth was sold). Thus, whereas the different coins found in Treblinka during excavation were important to the Polish delegation as forensic evidence that could prove the organized and systematic murder of Jews from all over Europe at the camp, Auerbach saw them as empathetic objects that revealed the social history of the Jewish victims.<sup>61</sup> She mentions the German order issued to the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto to bring with them gold and foreign currency as part of the German scheme to loot and debunks antisemitic notions about “Jewish gold”:

As a people of wanderers over the generations, and especially since the beginning of the war and the deportation, Jews had realized that they could be ordered out of their homes ... and leave all their possessions behind. For this reason, all the Jews tried to convert as much

as possible of their immovable property into movable goods. And the most movable of all goods were gold, jewelry and American dollars. [FT 67-68]

And like Grossman, she uses their valuables as a way to humanize the victims and tell their story. Here she provides a third list:

The strings of pearls, diamond earrings and gold necklaces inherited from grandparents, the gold coins of the previous generation, the Czarist gold rubles, American “hard” gold pieces; the few “soft” dollar bills which a Jew might have received from a relative in America and worn in a little bag around his neck. (FT 68)

Based on victims’ testimonies, Auerbach explains why most of the valuables were found hidden in women’s clothes: “It was believed that women would be less liable to be searched than men.” She mentions “small acts of defiance”—how Jewish victims “tore up their dollar bills in the last minute, but they could not tear up gold.” She also discusses the role assigned to the Jewish jewelers, the *Goldjuden*, in appraising the coins and valuables and how German and Ukrainian SS men sent unofficial “gifts” to their families (FT 68–69).

Auerbach turns to the objects not only to expose the Jewish identity of their owners but also to restore their voices. For example, she quotes from the testimony of one of the Treblinka survivors in the delegation, Samuel Rajzman, who had been a member of the Sonderkommando: “I spent about three months doing nothing but sorting eyeglasses. A huge number of eyeglasses passed through my hand during that period” (FT 56). She also quotes Alexander Kudlik, another survivor of Treblinka: “I spent about six months, just sorting pens” (FT 56)

Auerbach’s decision to treat the Jewish victims, particularly members of the Sonderkommando, as trustworthy, indeed as privileged witnesses, contrasts with the approach taken by the Allies at the Nuremberg Trial, who preferred to rely on German witnesses and incriminating documents. Indeed, only three Jewish witnesses appeared at Nuremberg, the most famous of them being the Yiddish Poet Abraham Sutzkever. One of the two other witnesses was Rajzman, who was summoned by the Soviets to testify on the mass killings in Treblinka.<sup>62</sup> Auerbach, however, uses Rajzman’s testimony about the statistics of looted goods that he and two other prisoners secretly compiled in the camp to reveal the systematic plunder undertaken by the

Germans. By citing the statistics collected by the Jewish prisoners, Auerbach sheds light on a lesser-known act of “resistance”—the clandestine actions of the Sonderkommando, whose members knew they were destined to be murdered yet resisted the German attempt to rob them of their humanity by undertaking to document the mass looting.

## Hair

The systematic looting did not stop with everyday objects. Body parts such as human hair and gold teeth, even prostheses, were all “products” of Treblinka’s death factory: “The modern, organized factory of corpses, the German murder plant, in which over a million Jewish lives were reduced to ashes, gold teeth, mattress hair and old clothes” (FT 25). How does one make death productive? By breaking all things (including human remains) down into their basic units, which are sorted and treated as “raw materials.”

Auerbach reports that scientists and experts were brought to Treblinka to teach new techniques and make the killing process more efficient:

It took some time for the technology and terminology of this new industry to reach full development, and for specialists to complete their training in the annihilation of humans, and in the destruction of the dead bodies.... The specialists in this new profession were businesslike, practical and conscientious. (FT 38)

Auerbach gives the example of the scientific “discovery” that the bodies of women burned better than those of men; hence the realization—“Men won’t burn without women” (FT 38). Like Grossman, Auerbach focuses on women’s hair, which was shaved before they entered the gas chambers. But she adds a Jewish dimension, calling the women “Treblinka brides” (FT 51) thus alluding to the Orthodox Jewish tradition of shaving the hair of the bride on her wedding night. All was collected, sorted, and shipped to Germany for recirculation.

## Bones

Instead of referring to desecrated bodies, Auerbach describes the earth itself as desecrated: “The bombs had uncovered the contents of the desecrated soil. Leg bones, ribs, pieces of spine, skulls big and small, short and long, round and flat. Skulls!” (FT 71). Although her text can be seen as an early precursor to modern forensic archaeology, which relies on science such as DNA technology, to identify bones, Auerbach remained ambivalent toward science, given its use by the Nazis to support their racist theories. Encountering the many skulls discovered in the fields of Treblinka, she comments sarcastically: “If only we could get an ethnologist to come here! He could have made the most accurate anthropological measurements relating to the racial features of the Jewish people” (FT 71). In light of the complicity of German science in the crimes, Auerbach describes the Jewish counterresponse: “We have already analyzed the data and defined the phenomena. The Germans created a science of annihilation and we are creating a science of perishing” (FT 58). She refers here to the documentation efforts by the victims, mentioned above. However, given the scientists’ betrayal, she was skeptical about the forensic approach adopted by the legal experts in the official Polish commission: “By now the district attorney and the judge knew every nook and cranny here. They had been conducting their investigation for some time. They had examined both Jewish and non-Jewish witnesses, taken measurements and carried out minor excavations” (FT 72). In contrast, she identified with the Treblinka survivors, who constantly blurred the boundaries between investigator and investigated, between living and dead, between legal investigation and religious ritual:

Look there, at the edge of that hole,” said the judge, “these are bones from a child’s leg!” One of the Treblinka survivors rushed over. “Be careful!” said another. “There’s still some flesh hanging from that leg! But the one who had taken it was wrapping it up into a newspaper with much the same reverence as a pious Jew wrapping up an *Etrog* [citron].... He wrapped it with the skirt of his coat, then put it into his breast pocket and hugged it to his breast. “Perhaps it’s the foot of my little boy, whom I brought here with me,” he said. And the weird truth is that ... this discovery could have chanced to be the plain, unvarnished truth.<sup>63</sup> (FT 72)

In this short but powerful paragraph, Auerbach offers a meditation on truth. There is forensic truth (“be careful not to damage the evidence, don’t touch”); there is religious truth

(treating the citron as sacred, wrapping it in cloth); and there is a personal or familial truth (“this could be my dead child”). The law distinguishes between two types of truth, objective and subjective. Forensic truth, the one that can be considered as “hard evidence,” is a form of truth that can be proven in public by various verifiable techniques. Subjective truth, the one experienced by the victim, is discounted by law as potentially biased by emotions or distorted by human frailty. It is only after victims become “witnesses” whose words are duly recorded and who undergo cross-examination that the law can rely on their testimony. But in Treblinka the survivor adopts a blatantly irrational position, treating a random child’s foot as if it belonged to his own child. Nonetheless, Auerbach thinks that his words may be more capable of revealing a deeper truth than a scientific, forensic examination, which produces only data. In the case of mass murder that amounts to genocide, what is the point of collecting and carefully examining each and every bone? That kind of investigation had to wait decades, until DNA technology was developed. And even then, given the enormous scale of the crime, from whom would DNA samples be taken? And does an approach that aims to identify each bone not risk obscuring the deeper meaning of a collective crime whose objective is to eliminate a whole people?

Auerbach’s text seems to waver between the forensic and the religious approaches. Whereas at the beginning of her journey, she was weighing the respective advantages and disadvantages of the legal and religious ways of contending with the mass murder, it seems that at the end of her journey, the approach of the Jewish religion to the dead has won her over as being more meaningful and a more faithful reflection of the experiences of the survivors themselves.<sup>64</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: DREAM, FOG AND TRUTH

In the epilogue to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt offered her verdict on the accused:

And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations—as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world—we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang.<sup>65</sup>

In their early writings on Treblinka, Grossman and Auerbach also evoke the earth, but they go a step further: they transform the natural environment, particularly the earth, itself into a moral witness to the crime: “Today the witnesses have spoken; the stones and the earth have cried out aloud,” asserts Grossman (HT 123). Both endow nature with a will of its own. In their representations of it, the earth in Treblinka is uncanny, unstable, full of holes, and constantly exposing the objects and bones still hidden within it. The earth in their narratives refuses to collaborate; it exposes the truth.

Both writers wanted to expose the Nazi deception, but also to resist the “ecological” worldview of the Nazis, in which “natural law” was harnessed to justify the need for *Lebensraum* for the “superior Aryan race,” while confining the Jews to enclosed, sealed spaces—ghettos.<sup>66</sup> And later, unwilling to share the earth with their victims, the Nazis transported the Jews to the small space of Treblinka to be murdered. Grossman imagines this cosmic crime through the prism of the first murder in human history—in the Bible: “Not a single person brought to Treblinka II [the death camp] ever made the return journey. The terrible question has to be asked: ‘Cain, where are they? Where are the people you brought here?’” (HT 122–23).

In pursuit of the answer to this “terrible” question, Grossman and Auerbach’s respective investigations led them to confront the limits of representation: to what extent can Treblinka be represented at all?<sup>67</sup> Both Grossman and Auerbach turned to materiality to illuminate the “hell of Treblinka,” but they responded to this epistemological question in different ways. Grossman did not reflect on the impossibility of representing Treblinka, since for him, it was impossible to “hide the traces” and silence the (nonhuman) witnesses to the crime (HT 157). The earth “does not want to keep secrets ... it is casting up everything that Hitler's people tried to bury within it” (HT 159). Auerbach, on the other hand, insisted on the limits of representation: “There is more reflection here than description; more is *said* than is *shown*. The realism of the concrete experience of the death camp is not portrayed” (FT 20). Her words “do not encompass the true picture of Treblinka, as I have seen and known it. It is no more than a sketch, a fragment of a picture” (FT 23).

Two literary motifs illuminate the difference between the authors’ approaches to the limits of representation. The first is *fog*. “When we left the town and took the side road for the final ten kilometers to Treblinka,” writes Auerbach when describing the arrival of the Polish delegation at Treblinka, “an eerie fog descended on the whole area” (FT 66).:

“Where did this fog come from?” someone in our car asked. “There will always be a fog over this place,” one of the Treblinka veterans replied. And I could sense that he was trying to say something, something important and profound. Something he had never said in his life before. But he couldn’t say it. (FT 67)

The silence of the Treblinka survivor signals a limit to the voice of the witness. By the same token, the fog obscures the investigators’ vision. This is not only a literary device to create an atmosphere of mourning (an identification of nature with the dead) but also an acknowledgment and acceptance of the inevitable limits on cognition. The fog allows one to see only parts of things, but no more. “Deep down in the hole [in the ground],” she writes, “some outlines could be dimly seen through the fog” (FT 72). Grossman, however, has no truck with fog. “Things are escaping of their own accord ... as if someone’s hand were pushing it all out into the light of day” (HT 160). Grossman’s Treblinka lies exposed under the glaring light of day for all to see.

The second literary theme is that of the *dream*. Near the end of Grossman’s narrative, when he stumbles across strands and plaits of women’s hair trampled in the ground, evidently “the contents of a sack, just a single sack that somehow got left behind,” Grossman experiences a cognitive jolt: “Yes, it is true. The last hope, the last wild hope that it was all just a terrible dream, has gone” (HT 160). The Nazis’ crime was not a dream, not a nightmare, but reality, a terrible reality. Grossman was propelled by what Robert Chandler calls his “love of truth.”<sup>68</sup> “It is the writer’s duty to tell the terrible truth, and it is a reader’s civic duty learn this truth,” Grossman writes. “To turn away, to close one’s eyes and walk past is to insult the memory of those who have perished” (HT 150).

For Auerbach, in contrast, a dream, immersed in fog, makes her doubt the lines between the living and the dead, the individual and the community:

These bones are the bones of all of us. Let us take a good look: Are these not also our own skulls lying in that sandpit? And we—or is it perhaps some cruel, furious God—aren’t we just dreaming on this death-like, dreary, foggy autumn day, that we still have our own heads on our shoulders? Isn’t it only a gratuitous accident that our bones are not also scattered all

over this field? Were we not all condemned together, to perish in the same way, and in the same place?<sup>69</sup> (FT 73)

In this enigmatic passage, Auerbach abandons the purposive and scientific rationality of the forensic delegation and resorts to the (il)logic of dreams. Maybe the Jewish survivors who have joined the delegation, like Auerbach herself, are only alive in the dream of a menacing God. Unlike Grossman, who evokes the motif of dream to reject it, Auerbach is ambivalent. In this spirit, near the end of her text, she raises fundamental questions about the delegation's forensic approach. Fog and dreams provide her with a different phenomenology of Treblinka. Blurring the lines, inverting the distinction between subject and object—these are signs of a dream, indeed a nightmare, but they also represent the radical change that Treblinka wrought to our previous understanding of war, crime, good and evil.

We began our journey with Glazer's *Zone of Interest* where the victims' absence becomes present only through material traces such as sound, sight and smell. We conclude by returning to the contemporary wave of material historiography that expands our definition of witness to include a "zone of sensory witnessing."<sup>70</sup> As historical research on the Holocaust expands to include the environment (sensory contamination) and the earth (forensic archaeology), it challenges the idea of a "crime without a witness." Grossman's and Auerbach's pioneering works on Treblinka were early harbingers of this material turn. By transforming material objects into forensic evidence of the genocide, they showed the need to overcome the divide between human and nonhuman witnesses by articulating a new conception of moral witnessing that encompasses both.

## NOTES

This article has been long in the making. I would like to thank the many individuals who read, discussed, researched and commented on previous drafts. I thank Gabriel Finder, Uri Brun, Rivka Brot, Katarzyna Czerwonogora, Tamar Elor, Olga Kartashova, Vered Lev Kenaan, Tamar Luster, Anat Rosenberg, and Philippa Shimrat. This research has been supported by a generous grant from The Minerva Center for Human Rights, Tel Aviv University.

<sup>1</sup> See Amy Herzog, “Proximities of Violence: The Zone of Interest,” *Film Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2024): 8–21.

<sup>2</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> This is part of a larger material shift in genocide studies. See Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra, eds., *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s the Yale University Fortunoff Video Archive, the Yad Vashem Remembrance Center and later Steven Spielberg started collecting recordings of survivor testimonies. See Michal Givoni, *The Care of the Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). For a study of different “ecologies” of witnessing partially based on these archives, see Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Robert Marrus, *Some Measure of Justice: The Holocaust Era Restitution Campaign of the 1990s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009); Leora Bilsky, *The Holocaust, Corporations, and the Law: Unfinished Business* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Zuzanna Dziuban, ed., *Mapping the “Forensic Turn”: Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond* (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017); Élisabeth Anstett and Jean-Marc Dreyfus, eds., *Human Remains and Identification: Mass Violence, Genocide, and the “Forensic Turn”* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Isaac Gilead, Yoram Haimi and Wojciech Mazurek, “Excavating Nazi Extermination Centers,” *Present Pasts* 1 (2009): 10–39.

<sup>7</sup> See Tim Cole, “‘Nature Was Helping Us’: Forests, Trees, and Environmental Histories of the Holocaust,” *Environmental History* 19, no. 4 (2014): 665–86; Joanna Krongold, “‘Are you Trembling, Earth?’: Nonhuman Nature in Literary Representations of the Holocaust,” *Environment, Space, Place* 15, no. 2 (2023): 63–88; Jessica Rapson, *Topographies of Suffering: Buchenwald, Babi Yar, Lidice* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Bozena Shallcross, *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Dan Stone, *Histories of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 146; Jacob Flaws, “Sensory Witnessing at Treblinka,” *Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 1 (2021): 45–46. The pioneering historiography on these camps appeared in Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). See also Witold Chrostowski, *Extermination Camp Treblinka* (London: V. Mitchell, 2004); and Chris Webb and Michal Chocholatý, *The Treblinka Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Earlier scholarship includes Boaz Neumann, “National Socialism, Holocaust, and Ecology,” in Dan Stone, ed., *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, 1st ed., (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 101–24; Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, 1st ed. (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015); Tim Cole, *Holocaust Landscapes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Claude Lanzmann, “Site and Speech: An Interview with Claude Lanzmann about *Shoah*,” in Stuart Liebman, ed., *Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah: Key Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Sue Vice and Dominic Williams, “Non-Sites of Memory: Poland in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* Outtakes,” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 21 (2021): 35–54.

<sup>13</sup> For this article, I use the following translations: Vasily Grossman, “The Hell of Treblinka,” in Vasily Grossman, *The Road: Stories, Journalism, and Essays*, ed. Robert Chandler, trans. Elizabeth Chandler, Robert Chandler and Olga Mukovnikova (New York: New York Review of Books, 2010), 116–162; and Rachel Auerbach, “In the Fields of Treblinka,” in Alexander Donat, ed., *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 19–74. For elaboration on their contribution to creating a “Treblinka Archive,” see Chad S.A. Gibbs, “Against That Darkness: Perseverance, Resistance, and Revolt at Treblinka” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 2021), 38–63. For a similar comparative approach that examines the role of the environment in early writings on the Holocaust, see Krongold, “Are you Trembling, Earth?,” 63–88, focusing on the works of Grossman and the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever.

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Sturdy Colls, “‘Earth Conceal Not My Blood’: Forensic and Archaeological Approaches to Locating the Remains of Holocaust Victims,” in Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Élisabeth Anstett eds., *Human Remains in Society: Curation and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Genocide and Mass-Violence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 163–64.

<sup>15</sup> See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ewa Domańska, “The Environmental History of Mass Graves,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 22, no. 2 (2019): 241. Against those who argue that such an approach might deepen the commodification of Holocaust victims, she argues that we must privilege the right of the dead to be left alone (to decompose) even at the price of injury to the memory of the victims (254). For a critical review of the literature, see Omer Bartov, “What Is the Environmental History of the Holocaust?,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 3 (2022): 419–28.

<sup>19</sup> Matilda Mroz, *Framing the Holocaust in Polish Aftermath Cinema: Posthumous Materiality and Unwanted Knowledge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 73.

<sup>20</sup> Flaws, “Sensory Witnessing at Treblinka”; Gibbs, “Against That Darkness.”

<sup>21</sup> See Tim Cole, *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death: Reflections on Memory and Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Tim Cole, “Expanding (Environmental) Histories of the Holocaust,” in “The Environmental History of the Holocaust,” special issue, *Journal of Genocide Research* 22, no. 2 (2020): 273–79. See also the introduction by Jacek Małczyński, Ewa Domańska, Mikołaj Smykowski and Agnieszka Kłos, “The Environmental History of the Holocaust,” *ibid.*, 183–96.

<sup>22</sup> Cole, “Expanding (Environmental) Histories of the Holocaust,” 274.

<sup>23</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–39* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1977), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Cole, “Expanding (Environmental) Histories of the Holocaust,” 276, citing Saul Friedländer, “Trauma, Memory and Transference,” in Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 261–62.

<sup>25</sup> Jan T. Gross with Irena Grudzinska Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). On materiality and space in Treblinka, see Gibbs, “Against That Darkness.”

<sup>26</sup> Caroline Sturdy Colls, “The Archaeology of Cultural Genocide: A Forensic Turn in Holocaust Studies?,” in Zuzanna Dziuban, ed., *Mapping the “Forensic Turn”: Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond* (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017): 119–42.

<sup>27</sup> Flaws, “Sensory Witnessing at Treblinka,” 46; Caroline Sturdy Colls, “Holocaust Archaeology: Archaeological Approaches to Landscapes of Nazi Genocide and Persecution,” *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 7, no. 2 (2012): 70–104; Sturdy Colls, “Earth Conceal Not My Blood”.

<sup>28</sup> See Alexandra Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century: Vasily Grossman’s Life, Art, and Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 152–83.

<sup>29</sup> See the commentary of Robert Chandler and Yury Bit-Yunan, “The War, the Shoah,” in Grossman, *The Road*, 68.

<sup>30</sup> Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 2; “Vasilii Grosman,” <https://www.yadvashem.org/research/research-projects/soldiers/vasilii-grossman.html> (accessed March 4, 2025).

<sup>31</sup> John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev: The Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 190, 294n26. Grossman does not appear to have participated in the investigation of Treblinka conducted by the Soviets’ Extraordinary State Commission (ChGK). According to Caroline Sturdy Colls, the ChGK’s investigation occurred in August 1944, before Grossman arrived there and was limited to two days. Caroline Sturdy Colls, “Gone But Not Forgotten: Archaeological Approaches to the Site of the Former Treblinka Extermination Camp in Poland,” *Holocaust: Studies and Materials* 3 (2014): 276. Furthermore, Grossman and other members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee had only limited access to the ChGK’s findings. See Marina Sorokina, “People and Procedures: Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 4 (2005): 802n13.

<sup>32</sup> Grossman, “The Hell of Treblinka,” 125. (Hereafter HT. Further references to this essay will appear in the text in parentheses.)

<sup>33</sup> Grossman’s main Jewish source on Treblinka was a Russian translation of the memoir by Yenkel Wiernik, *A Year in Treblinka*, published clandestinely in May 1944 in Poland, which is found among his papers: Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 177.

<sup>34</sup> It was too sensitive to call them “Ukrainians” because the Soviet leadership did not publicly acknowledge the existence of collaborators among rank-and-file soldiers when Grossman wrote “The Hell of Treblinka.” Thus, Grossman had to employ the term *Wachmänner* to pass muster with the censors. See Garrard and Garrard, *Bones of Berdichev*, 191.

<sup>35</sup> His notebook also contains drawings of the death camp’s layout. Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 174.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Krongold, “Are You Trembling Earth?”

<sup>37</sup> Henry Greenspan, Sara R. Horowitz, Éwa Kovács, Berel Lang, Dori Laub, Kenneth Waltzer and Annette Wiewiorka, “Engaging Survivors: Assessing ‘Testimony’ and ‘Trauma’ as Foundational Concepts,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 28, no. 3 (2014): 205.

<sup>38</sup> Garrard and Garrard, *Bones of Berdichev*, 206.

<sup>39</sup> Grossman was cognizant of the Nazis genocide of the Jews. See Vasily Grossman, “Ukraine without Jews,” trans. Polly Zavadiwker, *Jewish Quarterly* 217 (2011): 12–18. Grossman published this essay in *Eynikayt*, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee’s periodical, in November and December 1943. But at the meeting of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee’s literary commission to discuss *The Black Book* in October 1944, Grossman “felt that Jewish victims should be treated as human beings, not as a separate nationality. Grossman’s view ... was that the victims should be identified as Jews first, but then be distinguished as individual personalities and as members of the human race.” Garrard and Garrard, *Bones of Berdichev*, 205.

<sup>40</sup> This term seems to have been in the air in the USSR when Grossman entered Treblinka and wrote “The Hell of Treblinka.” Valentyna Polunina observes that the Soviet legal scholar Aron Trainin already developed the concept of “crimes against humanity” in his path-breaking book *Ugolovnaia otvetstvennost’ gitlerovtsev* [The criminal responsibility of the Hitlerites], which was published in Russian and then translated into English in 1944. Trainin was one of the Soviet representatives during the drafting of the London Charter, and the ideas expressed in this book influenced its outcome. Valentyna Polunina, “The Human Face of Soviet Justice? Aron Trainin and the Origins of the Soviet Doctrine of International Criminal Law,” in David M. Crowe, ed., *Stalin’s Soviet Justice: “Show Trials,” War Crimes Trials, and Nuremberg* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 127–44.

<sup>41</sup> Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *The Author of Himself: The Life of Marcel Reich-Ranicki*, trans. Ewald Osers (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 181.

<sup>43</sup> Garrard and Garrard, *Bones of Berdichev*, 206–207, 395, n. 17. Grossman took with him back from Treblinka a child’s building block and a shoe and later donated them to the Vilna Jewish Museum. Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 179.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Chandler suggests that Grossman’s “lists of objects, of the former belongings of former people, do more than just bring us down to earth—to what Grossman refers to as ‘the swaying, bottomless earth of Treblinka.’ They are also the truest witnesses to the lives that have been destroyed. Grossman knows that these objects say more than he can.” Robert Chandler, “Grossman and ‘The Hell of Treblinka,’” in Grossman, *The Road*, 296.

<sup>45</sup> Vasily Grosman and Yankiel Viernik, *Treblinke* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in argentine, 1946). Wiernik’s essay was originally written in Warsaw in Polish, during May 1944. It was smuggled to London and appeared in English and in Yiddish in the United States. Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 177. For the original, see Ghetto Fighters’ House Archives, Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta’ot, Israel. “Berman Collection,” file 3166 (printed booklet of Yakov Wiernik’s “Year in Treblinka,” typewritten Polish original, and handwritten testimony).

<sup>46</sup> Vasiliĩ Grosman, *Piekło Treblinki* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo “Literatura Polska,” 1946).

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007). The archive was buried in three different places before the destruction of the ghetto. Auerbach was one of the three surviving members of the archive’s staff and after the war helped find the first burial site of the archive. She referred to the recovery of the lost archive as “an archaeological excavation.” Rachel Auerbach, *Be-hutzot Varshah, 1939–1943* [In the streets of Warsaw, 1939–1943], trans. Mordekhai Halmish (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1954), 322.

<sup>48</sup> See Natalia Aleksion, “The Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland, 1944–1947,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 20 (2008): 74–97; and Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 84–120. The CŻKH and its successor, the Jewish Historical Institute, played an active part in the Polish trials of Nazi criminals. See Gabriel N. Finder and Alexander V. Prusin, *Justice behind the Iron Curtain: Nazis on Trial in Communist Poland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 179–212.

<sup>49</sup> Auerbach, “In the Fields of Treblinka,” 52. (Hereafter FT. Further references to this essay will appear in the text within parentheses.)

<sup>50</sup> See also Finder and Prusin, *Justice Behind the Iron Curtain*, 187–88.

<sup>51</sup> An excerpt appeared in the Polish Yiddish newspaper, *Dos naye lebn*, no. 52 (December 23, 1945): 1–4. Excerpts were also published in Hebrew in 1954: Auerbach, *Be-hutsot Varshah* [In the streets of Warsaw]. The book was submitted as evidence in the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

<sup>52</sup> Auerbach recorded Krzepicki’s testimony in Yiddish in December 1942–January 1943. It was buried alongside the archive’s other materials, which had not yet been found prior to the forensic delegation’s visit to Treblinka. Krzepicki was killed in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (Auerbach, “In the Fields of Treblinka,” 26). See Abraham Krzepicki, “Eighteen Days in Treblinka,” in Alexander Donat, ed., *The Death Camp Treblinka* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 77–145.

<sup>53</sup> Among the few testimonies and memoirs by survivors on Treblinka, Auerbach’s is the only one written by a woman. For elaboration and criticism of the neglect of women’s contribution to the revolt in Treblinka, see Gibbs, “Against That Darkness,” 163–94.

<sup>54</sup> Unlike other members of the CŻKH, Auerbach never testified in court in Poland. In Israel, she founded and headed the victims’ testimonies unit at Yad Vashem and advised the prosecution in the Eichmann trial, where she also testified. See Leora Bilsky, “Rachel Auerbach and the Eichmann Trial: A New Conception of Victims’ Testimonies,” *Journal of Holocaust Research* 36, no. 4 (2022): 327–45.

<sup>55</sup> Jan Gross notes that the word “dentist” was still in use long after the war and the obliteration of the camps to refer to the Polish diggers who continued to search for Jewish valuables and gold teeth. Gross, *Golden Harvest*, 29n41.

<sup>56</sup> Here and elsewhere, emphasis in the original. Auerbach’s analysis of “ordinary people” as perpetrators at Treblinka anticipates Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann and the “banality of evil.”

<sup>57</sup> See Caroline Sturdy Colls and Robert M. Ehrenreich, “Value in Context: Material Culture and Treblinka,” *Current Anthropology* 62, no. 5 (2021): 548–51. Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 79; Layla Renshaw, *Exhuming Loss: Memory, Materiality and Mass Graves of the Spanish Civil War* (Walnut Creek: Routledge, 2011), 9.

<sup>58</sup> Caroline Sturdy Colls and Michael Branthwaite, “‘This Is Proof?’ Forensic Evidence and Ambiguous Material Culture at Treblinka Extermination Camp,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 22, no. 3 (2018): 451.

<sup>59</sup> Grossman writes: “This is the murder of a people, the murder of homes, entire families, books, faith, the murder of the tree of life.... This is the murder of a people’s morals, customs and anecdotes passed from father to sons.” Grossman, “Ukraine without Jews,” 13. However, Grossman, unlike Auerbach, emphasizes the universal significance of the crime: “It is not only Europe, but in fact all of humanity that stands on the threshold of extinction,” (ibid., 15).

<sup>60</sup> Cultural genocide and the Jewish struggle against it in the ghetto is the subject of Auerbach’s book *Warsaw Testaments*[] that appeared originally in Hebrew[Tzavaot Varsha] in 1985 and has recently been translated into English: Rokhl Auerbach, *Warsaw Testament*, trans. Samuel Kas-sow (Boston: White Goat Press, 2024).

<sup>61</sup> For the difference between the two approaches see Sturdy Colls and Ehrenreich, “Value in Context,” 544. For the need to integrate analytical/objective and empathetic elements in archaeological accounts of Nazi camps, see Bernbeck, “An Emerging Archaeology of the Nazi Era,” 368. For the coins, see the report of the Central Commission for Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, *German Crimes in Poland* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1982), 105.

<sup>62</sup> See Finder and Prusin, *Justice Behind the Iron Curtain*, 77–79.

<sup>63</sup> The citron is integral to Jewish ritual during Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) and can only be used if it is unblemished.

<sup>64</sup> Contemporary forensic excavations at former Nazi death camps are now undertaken in consultation with Jewish religious authorities and scrupulously avoid the disturbance of human remains, which is generally prohibited by Jewish law. See Sturdy Colls, “Earth Conceal Not My Blood,” 169–70.

<sup>65</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 279.

<sup>66</sup> For elaboration on the “ecological” worldview of the Nazis, see Boaz Neumann, *Re’iyat ha-olam ha-natsit:Merhav, guf, safah* [The Nazi worldview: Space, body, language] (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2002).

<sup>67</sup> See Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>68</sup> Robert Chandler, “Introduction: ‘Speaking for Those Who Lie in the Earth’: The Life and Work of Vasily Grossman,” in Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler (New York: New York Review Books, 1985), viii.

<sup>69</sup> The Yiddish better captures her meaning: “And maybe it is only a dream of some kind of evil, angry God, merely a dream about a deathly melancholy, foggy autumn day when we still have our heads on our shoulders.” Auerbach, *Oyf di felder fun treblinke*, 108.

<sup>70</sup> Flaws, “Sensory Witnessing at Treblinka”

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LEORA BILSKY is [affiliation, status, recent books]