

After the Holocaust

The Book of Job, Primo Levi, and the Path to Affliction

The Holocaust marks a decisive moment in modern suffering in which it becomes almost impossible to find meaning or redemption in the experience. In this study, C. Fred Alford offers a new and thoughtful examination of the experience of suffering. Moving from the Book of Job, an account of meaningful suffering in a God-drenched world, to the work of Primo Levi, who attempted to find meaning in the Holocaust through absolute clarity of insight, he concludes that neither strategy works well in today's world. More effective are the day-to-day coping practices of some Holocaust survivors. Drawing on testimonies of survivors from the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University Library, Alford also applies the work of Julia Kristeva and the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott to his examination of suffering, a topic that has been and continues to be central to human experience.

C. Fred Alford is Professor of Government and Distinguished Scholar-Teacher at the University of Maryland, College Park. A recipient of three awards from the Fulbright Commission, he is the author of more than a dozen books in moral psychology – most recently, *Psychology and the Natural Law of Reparation*.

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The Book of Job, Primo Levi, and the Path to Affliction

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To my mother, who understood affliction.

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Preface

The list of those to whom I owe thanks for making this book possible is longer than usual.

My brother-in-law, Ira Wolfson, helped introduce me to the complexity of the Book of Job.

My colleague, Jeffrey Herf, of the History Department at the University of Maryland, College Park, first suggested that I compare Job with Primo Levi. It turned out to be an enormously fruitful suggestion, although I'm not quite sure what he will think of the result.

My departmental chair, Mark Lichbach, has supported and encouraged my work in ways big and small.

My colleague, Jim Glass, once again read the entire manuscript and once again helped me retrieve the key argument, which it is all too easy to lose in the details.

Matt Bowker, a former graduate student and now a professor in his own right, helped me teach an honor's seminar on affliction and taught me much of what I know about Camus.

Aryeh Botwinick, a colleague at Temple University, helped me with the biblical Hebrew, as well as encouraging me along the way. Sara Botwinick, his wife and a social worker for a Jewish social services agency, helped me understand the vulnerability of the aging survivor.

I owe a particular debt of gratitude not only to the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University Library, but also to the lead archivist there, Joanne Rudof. We had several valuable discussions, and she taught me how important it is not to remain

transfixed by the suffering of the witness but rather to look beyond to those who caused this suffering and why.

Several times, Ms. Rudof served as a conduit between the eminent Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer and me. I would ask a question, Ms. Rodof would ask Professor Langer, and Ms. Rudof would transmit his answer. It took me a while to realize that this mediated form of communication was my own choice because Langer had made his email address available to me. Whether it was the “anxiety of influence” or my reluctance to disagree with a man who knew so much more than I about the survivor experience that held me back, I am not sure. In any case, I learned much this way, and whereas I believe that I emphasize the creativity of the survivors’ response more than is apparent in Langer’s work, I have no doubt that I owe Langer more than I know.

It is difficult to explain to one who has not had the experience how compelling watching videotaped interviews with Holocaust survivors can be. For most of the interviews in the Fortunoff Video Archives (some were conducted by other organizations), the camera focuses exclusively on the witness for the entire interview, usually focusing on the face, sometimes moving back to take in the entire body, occasionally moving between face and hands. The interview has no time limit but generally runs between one and two hours. Good interviewers (who far outnumber the bad) ask relatively few questions and tolerate long, anguished silences; the result is that while watching the interview on a television monitor, I was the one drawn in. More than once, I was momentarily disoriented when, at the end of the interview, the camera pulled back, revealing the subject together with the interviewers. I felt as if I had been there alone with the witness.

This is not an unusual experience when watching a good movie or play. At the theater, my wife loves to sit in the first row so she can feel herself part of the action, almost imagining she is on stage with the actors. She wants to lose herself in the play for a couple of hours. That’s why people go to the movies or theater. It doesn’t seem like anyone would want to do that while watching Holocaust testimony for six hours a day, five days a week, and then going back to a hotel room at night and spending another few hours typing up one’s notes in order to keep it all straight. However, although I didn’t want to do it, I sometimes felt I almost had to do it – more than that I cannot explain.

My research in the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University Library, as well as my subsequent writing of the chapter devoted to this testimony, was supported by a General Research Board Award from the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park.

My wife, Elly, understands the importance of this work, even as she finds it difficult to discuss.

On hearing me complain about how difficult it was to listen to Holocaust testimony all day and then write about it at night, my friend, Milton Teichman, said something along the lines of, “If they can endure it and live to tell about it, you can sit in a comfortable room and watch and write about it.” He is absolutely right. It is unbecoming to complain about the hardships of viewing Holocaust testimony.

Another friend, Cheryl Dockser, pointed out the passage in Philip Roth’s *Exit Ghost*, referring to Primo Levi’s suicide.

My editor at Cambridge, Beatrice Rehl, worked with me longer on this book than I had a right to expect, especially when I ended up rewriting it in midstream. It is a pleasure to work with her.

A couple of anonymous reviewers for Cambridge were enormously helpful.

I regret that I was unable to use material from several conversations with Holocaust survivors in which I was fortunate to participate. One survivor was imprisoned at the same slave-labor camp as Primo Levi. Those conversations, however, prepared me for the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies, and nothing I saw or heard in those testimonies fails to fit the general tenor of the conversations in which I participated.