Unsilencing Voices

David P. Boder's Transatlantic Holocaust Project, Multilingual Memory, and Intermedia Studies

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Little did I know, when my dissertation advisor mentioned that he would have a postdoctoral project for me, right before I handed in my doctoral thesis to Harvard's Comparative Literature Department, that I would live with the voices of Holocaust survivors in my head for the two and a half years to come. »I came across this book published in the U.S. in 1949,« Werner Sollors said. »It contains the earliest interviews ever done with survivors of the Holocaust, many conducted in German, by this American language psychologist David Pablo Boder. It's never been published in Germany. Would you like to take on such a first German edition with me and Alan Rosen, a colleague from Israel?«

I sure did. And so we embarked upon a journey of unsilencing the voices of survivors from a great variety of European countries who had walked out of the camps and shared their raw impressions of their everyday lives – inside and outside of the camps – with Boder. The result was *Die Toten habe ich nicht befragt*.[1] We began excavating the survivors' memories in 2009, as Boder had unearthed them in 1946. His project became an international editing cooperation of our multinational trio, living, at the time, in the United States, Israel, and Germany, respectively. In his distinct representation of the Holocaust, Boder presented us with what was, in fact, a multilingual challenge. It seemed significant to us that, via his collected interviews, we were confronted with a case of early Holocaust memory that was not solely captured in the English language (as it mostly was postwar) but with memories that had been multilingual and international from the start. That the interviews had never seen light in Germany had been Boder's great chagrin during his lifetime. So from the beginning, our project was one marked by belatedness. For this reason, however, the project seemed even more pressing. The way we experience trauma, of course, often happens in a belated manner. The belatedness of this book about people's traumatic experiences seemed to make somewhat sense. But did it? Let me begin by recounting how this intermedia project by Boder – for it was not simply a book – originally came into being.

1 | David P. Boder: Die Toten habe ich nicht befragt. Ed. by Julia Faisst, Alan Rosen, and Werner Sollors. Heidelberg 2011. The second edition appeared in 2012.

In 1946, the 60-year old American psychologist David P. Boder visited refugee camps in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany for nine weeks. He schlepped along a piece of brand-new technology, a state-of-the-art wire recorder, as well as 200 spools of steel wire. With that technology, Boder recorded 130 first-hand testimonies in nine languages: mostly with Jewish, but also non-Jewish, survivors of Nazi terror, concentration camps, and unspeakable acts of violence. As far as we know, he was the only researcher who undertook such a wide-reaching project at the time. As I mentioned, his recordings represent the earliest known oral histories of the Holocaust. The people whom he interviewed spoke about the cruel experiences they were forced to endure mostly for the first time as well. Boder recorded the 120 hours of interviews in Paris, Geneva, Tradate (Italy), the reinstated synagogue in Wiesbaden (the state capital of Hesse), and the Funkkaserne in Munich, which served as a transit camp for displaced persons – the so-called DPs.

As Rosen puts it, Boder's

> goals were straightforward. First of all, he wanted to preserve an authentic record of wartime suffering. Second, he was professionally interested as a psychologist in the impact of extreme suffering on personality. Third, he wanted to increase the knowledge of a post-war American public who knew little about what happened to the victims in the ghettos and in the concentration camps. And finally, he hoped that the DPs' stories could be effective in advocating on their behalf for immigration to America.[2]

What is probably most important, today, is not that *I Did Not Interview the Dead* necessarily changes »our idea of what the Holocaust is, or was.« The value of its testimonies lies in what they »teach us about the history and nature of Holocaust testimony,«[3] and in what they teach us about the vagaries of memory and forgetting. What is so unusual about them is their focus on the acoustics of memory, rather than the visuals that, in the words of Frank Mehring, »have become fundamental for memorializing the Holocaust.«[4] Just think of the plethora of liberation footage of concentration camps used for newsreels in the U. S. and Great Britain, which did not come with live sound recordings, but rather overlaid commentaries and background music.

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2 | Alan Rosen: David Boder. Early Postwar Voices: David Boder's Life and Work, online at http://voices.iit.edu/david_boder.

3 | Alan Rosen: The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder. Oxford 2010, p. ix.

4 | Frank Mehring: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews: David Boder's Intermedia Project in the Digital Age. In: Amerikastudien/American Studies 58 (2013), No. 1, pp. 139-150, here p. 140.

Fig. 1: Courtesy of Professor Yair Aharonowitz.

After recording the interviews, Boder transcribed seventy of them onto more than 3,100 pages. Simultaneously, he dictated the English translations in an off-handed manner. Eventually, he published eight of the interviews in English in 1949, in a book entitled *I Did Not Interview the Dead*. The title of the book possibly refers to Mary McCarthy, criticizing John Hersey, who had published *Hiroshima*, a landmark report on the bombing and its aftermath in 1946, for not having spoken with the dead.[5] The eight interviews Boder chose for the volume describe the worst kind of life experiences from the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, the 34-year old Polish Jewish woman Anna Kovitzka (who, in real life, was called Anna Kaletska; Boder slightly changed the names) described how Nazi extermination policies were carried out, the suffering in Grodno Ghetto, in Auschwitz, and, with a shaking voice, her liberation by the Americans during a death march that was supposed to lead to Bergen-Belsen.

5 | Werner Sollors: Ethnic Modernism. Cambridge/London 2008, p. 232.

The grueling experiences, which Boder recorded so meticulously, had not yet been given names at the time. Terms such the »Holocaust« were coined only in the mid-1950s. Another interviewee, Abe Mohnblum, who was only 18 at the time, and is probably the most haunting voice in the collection, called the death marches he was forced to undertake as a teenager variously »trips« or »journeys.« So did Boder. In other words, Boder (with the help of his interviewees) investigated the Holocaust before it was even known as the »Holocaust.«

Mohnblum spent a quarter of his life in concentration camps, was separated from his mother in Sosnowitz, and found himself in Buchenwald at the end of the war. His memories, because they are so fresh, are still entirely raw. This emotional rawness distinguishes the interviews from those which were recorded later. Boder succeeds not only in capturing his interviewees' experiences – as of yet unprocessed – in precise ways, but also the stirring emotions that accompany them at every turn. It is these emotions, coming out of the desperate attempt to make sense of what made absolutely no sense, which probably affect us most when we read the interviews today. »What is man?« – »Was ist ein Mensch?« – is the quintessential question Mohnblum poses, while recollecting how he was not able to recognize himself anymore, nor others. When he looked into faces, he says with a tremble in his voice that shakes the listener, too, he looked into »eyes like reflectors,« seeing nothing.

The people whom Boder interviewed witnessed murder, forced deaths of family members and dear friends. They experienced violence, cruelty, abuses, displacement in freight trains, and the barbarity of forced labor and concentration camps. Boder often interrupts the narratives in order to get at more precise details, dates, and geographical information, or simply to drive the narrative forward. In at least one case, he has a dispute with one of his interviewees about the role of psychology.

In the introduction to his book, Boder developed a short theory of trauma, with which he tried to understand what he called the systematic »deculturation« of the victims with the help of a traumatic index. It is fascinating – and terrifying – how the traumatic traces of the experiences are indeed inscribed into the disturbing language of the interviews. Given Boder's trauma theory, and the various remediations the book underwent, *I Did Not Interview the Dead* can be viewed as an unusually early attempt at research into the nature of memory, as well as a form of intermedia studies before its day.

Boder, who was born in Latvia in 1886, grew up in a Jewish household. He studied in Vilnius, Leipzig, and at the Psycho-Neurological Research Institute in St. Petersburg (which gained world fame through Ivan Pavlov). Boder served in the First World War in the Russian Army, left Russia in 1919 and emigrated via Siberia and Japan, first to Mexico, where he taught at the National University, until he could immigrate into the U.S. in 1926. Here, he obtained a Master's degree in language psychology at the University of Chicago, received his PhD at Northwestern University, and then taught psychology at the Lewis Institute in Chicago (later

renamed Illinois Institute of Technology), where he also co-founded the Museum of Psychology. Boder had turned into an international migrant, if not an outright refugee, himself – more or less fluent in German, Yiddish, and Russian, as well as in Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, French, English, and Spanish: all the languages in which the interviews would be conducted.[6]

Boder was interested, as I have already alluded to, in a »precise record« of recent memories: in the very voice and, even more importantly, in the mother tongue of each particular witness. Let us not forget that inmates of concentration camps were often neither allowed to speak in their mother tongue, nor to read books in it. At the same time, inmates were exposed to the confusion of a multitude of languages and dialects they did not understand. In many ways, therefore, they had to re-learn to speak and familiarize themselves with their own voices once the war had ended – to ultimately feel »at home« in their own language. I take their condition of speechlessness, and sheer bewilderment, when it came to the telling of their former internment and oppression, as one of the main reasons why some of them grapple so much with their own tongue in the interviews. Their trauma is inscribed in their frequent non-standard use of language, uncommon use of idioms, sentence structure, even the discrepancies of place and time.

Boder, who, as a psychologist, was particularly interested in language, and had done research about the varying use of verbs and adjectives by women and men before the Second World War, did not want to erase the linguistic traces of the traumatic experiences from the interviews or make them invisible in the English translations. He was also hoping for a later publication of the testimonies in those languages in which they had been conducted. In particular, he believed that a German edition of these interviews was of great importance. Boder died in 1961. But only in 2011, fifty years after his death, the first German edition saw the light of day.

I Did Not Interview the Dead is a pioneering work of oral history, which not only collects but also analyzes autobiographical testimonies based on wire recordings. In 1946, Boder's work with the wire recorder was groundbreaking. Of the eight interviews collected in the book, five were original recordings and transcriptions in German; apart from Boder's preface, only the two Yiddish and the Russian interviews had to be translated – or so we thought. For the translations, both the archival transcriptions and the English translation of 1949 served as a basis. Quickly, however, it became clear that almost all the texts needed some kind of »translation« – or »re-translation.« As it turned out, Boder, and those who had helped him with his transcriptions, had in fact inserted quite a variety of mistakes (based on non-native ears), as well as smoothed out, after all, the

6 | See http://voices.iit.edu/explore_by?by=interview_language. 70 interviews were conducted in German, 32 in Yiddish, 22 in Russian, 15 in English, and smaller numbers in the other languages.

language, so as to make it more »readable.« Our aim was to carefully reconstitute the originals as much as possible, and thereby re-gain all those features that might irritate, confuse, or even annoy its contemporary reader, but that speak most authentically to the nature of the fresh memories that were, back then, only in the making. What is more, the aural »fissures and break-ups« of the interviews »prevents [them] from aestheticizing the events«.[7] We exchanged many an email with the publisher, Andreas Barth from Universitaetsverlag Winter in Heidelberg, in order to discuss how many grammatical inconsistencies and, even more importantly, misremembered dates, places, and events on part of the interviewees could be asked of the German reader. As it finally turned out, to our relief, very many.

The edition that ensued is marked by the kind of inconsistencies that have since become a major component of trauma studies. We supplemented the book with three different kinds of footnotes, a critical apparatus that consisted of detailed annotations: first, those taken over from the English edition; second, those supplied mostly by Rosen (who also provided an afterword); and third, those of our translators (mostly enthusiastic fellow German Americanists). Taken together, these footnotes provide much of the historical background that had been misremembered in the interviews. In that sense, the book is also a critical edition of Boder's work. The challenges that came with formatting three different systems of footnotes are another story. But what mostly kept me up many a night were the voices of the survivors. I listened to them again and again, headphones on, to get each passage as ›right‹ – that is as literal – as possible, re-transcribing the voices as I kept listening for hours on end – luckily, at some point, with the tireless help of another German Americanist colleague, Holger Droessler. The voices and their peculiar way of speaking (often unidiomatic, often laden with emotions) lodged themselves in my mind; it felt almost as if they asked me to continue to write forth the texts they had provided me with. We relied on Boder's archive held at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where the less and less audible wire recordings had been digitized between 1998 and 2002. They now form a major part of the collection's online presence, called *Voices of the Holocaust*.[8]

To be sure, *I Did Not Interview the Dead* is significant as an early psychological contribution to Holocaust and trauma studies. Six of the eight interviews are dedicated to Holocaust survivors. The German edition fulfilled Boder's long-standing

7 | Mehring: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews, p. 147. He refers here to Frank Kelleter: Als Begriffe für das Grauen noch fehlten. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. November 30, 2011, online at www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/sachbuch/david-p-boder-die-toten-habe-ich-nicht-befragt-als-begriffe-fuer-das-grauen-noch-fehlten-11546727.html.

8 | Voices of the Holocaust. Paul V. Galvin Library. Illinois Institute of Technology 2009, online at http://voices.iit.edu.

wish of publishing at least some of his interviews in that language in which they had originally been conducted – since, for language psychologist Boder, the linguistic nuances of the testimonies were almost as important as the sad content, which they transmit exclusively from the perspective of the victims.

However, Boder's project has also always been one of forgetting. The wire recordings, which Boder brought back to the U.S., had been lost for a long time. That the historical significance of the interviews – at least in Germany – was not recognized after the Second World War, might be due to the general amnesia Holocaust testimonies faced at the time. What was especially disconcerting for us, however, was how difficult it turned out to win over a German publisher for the project. Over the course of many months, University Presses told us it was not academic enough. Trade presses told us it was too academic. Acclaimed publishing places said they could not believe it had never been published, but were too concerned with sales numbers. Was it a problem of genre? Was it that Boder's work was so hard to classify (and thus to put on the correct shelf in bookstores)? After all, were they interviews (some sounding almost ballad-like), testimonials, autobiography, or even spoken literature? As a scholar trained mostly in literature, I could not help wondering whether the book indeed was too literary, for its own sake and claim of authenticity. Boder himself thought of the »oral narratives« as a new form of »literature.«[9] Scholars like Mehring, too, point to the status of the interviews as »literary experiments,« given the »peculiar interdependence between aural recording, free speech and literary text.«[10] The question to what degree Holocaust testimonies can or should be called authentic today, or are always already infused with a good dose of fiction, remains a contested question in the field. At any rate, the book fell between the cracks, or as the Germans say, between all chairs (more than two stools for sure), until I met with the head of the Winter Publishing Company at the Frankfurt book fair in 2010. Without Andreas Barth's personal interest and belief in the importance of the subject matter, the book might never have been published. Ultimately, in 1949, Boder might not have interviewed the dead, yet – with the German edition, and sadly so, he did.

It was a moving moment when Gert Silver, previously Gert Silberbart, a survivor of Buchenwald and Auschwitz, who had talked with Boder in 1946 in Switzerland, got in touch via email from Australia after he had spotted an advertisement for the book. In the U.S., France, and Germany, the interest in Boder's work has significantly increased over the past dozen years. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has conducted new interviews with several of Boder's interview partners. In June 2007, a symposium took place at the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin with American, Israeli, and European participants, who analyzed Boder's project in relation to later interviews with Holocaust survivors. Rosen examined Boder's work in several of his books, and a French translation of the

9 | See Rosen's afterword in Boder: Die Toten habe ich nicht befragt, p. 362.

10 | Mehring: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews, p. 142.

original Boder was published in Paris. Today, the material is discussed at academic conferences and workshops[11], has become the topic of an online research portal initiated by Axel Dossmann, »Displaced Persons 1946 in Interviews with David P. Boder« (which also includes a list of recent publications on Boder)[12], the weblog *Questions to Displaced Persons 1946 and Today*[13], supported by the Federal Agency for Civic Education, the Buchenwald and Mittelbau Dora Memorials Foundation and the University of Jena, and a dissertation by Daniel Schuch.[14] It is taught in high school and college classrooms around the world. Boder even made it into a novel as a fictionalized character, in Elliot Perlman's 2012 *The Street Sweeper*.[15]

Shortly after *Die Toten habe ich nicht befragt* came out, and Frank Kelleter's favorable review had appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of the major German dailies, the publisher called us. »Open a bottle of champagne,« he said, »Boder is selling 80–100 copies a day.« We were too humbled to open even a virtual bottle. The first edition sold out in three months, and was followed by a slightly revised edition in 2012. Maybe one or the other reader, too, will feel inspired by this essay to include the Boder interviews into her or his classes, put them on their research agenda, or even put in print those 15 interviews Boder conducted in English, and thus help to continue the work of unsilencing those early postwar voices.

11 | Such as, for instance, at a conference entitled *70 Jahre nach Boders Interviews: Erfahrungen nationalsozialistischer Verfolgung für die Gegenwart begreifbar machen*, which took place in Jena, Germany, in 2016. See www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-81294.

12 | See www.gmoe.uni-jena.de/index.php?id=62.

13 | See www.dp-boder-1946.uni-jena.de.

14 | The dissertation is entitled *Transformationen der Zeugenschaft. Von der Wissensproduktion in David P. Boders Forschungsinterviews zur moralischen Sinngebung des Holocaust* and is currently being prepared for publication.

15 | Elliot Perlman: The Street Sweeper. New York 2012.