Introduction

*Rutka's Notebook* is a diary kept by a young Jewish girl who lived in Bedzin, Poland during the Holocaust. Rutka Laskier started to keep her diary four months before she was deported to Auschwitz. In this diary, written in a school notebook, she recounts her adolescent life in the ghetto as well as her distress vis-à-vis the atrocities the Nazis inflicted upon her and her people. Aware of the risk she ran to be moved to Kamionka, Rutka agreed with Stanisława Sapinska, the apartment owners' daughter whom she had befriended, that she would hide her notebook in the apartment before leaving. In 1945, when the war was over, Sapinska returned to the apartment and found the diary in the place Rutka had indicated to her back in 1943.

Pages from Rutka's notebook sent by Zahava Shertz, Rutka's half-sister.
Through the Broken Wor(l)ds

*Rutka's Notebook* was first brought to the public's awareness only in 2006. Rutka’s Polish friend, who decided to reveal her secret to a relative, and pass on this silenced voice, kept this notebook secret for sixty years. Though written by a Jewish teenager in distress who was driven by the urge to leave some record, this diary constitutes a literary work which contains ingenious dialectics between form and content, growth and death, sensitivity and evil, life and hell; in short, the economy of the darkest period of history and its impact on Rutka's soul.

*Rutka's Notebook* manifests a tremendous testimony that reflects in its poetics the tumultuous events she and her people were inflicted with, by and by, and which later on were cruelly swept away.

Rutka's writing is characterized by a binary mode, which reflects the coping strategies she put at work a few months before she was taken to her death. It also displays the existential crisis Rutka and the Jewish youth went through. In a sense, through her own voice, she voices their inner and outer worlds. As such, Rutka's diary constitutes the diachronic voice of the (silenced) others.

The diary opens with Rutka's perplexity about the historical period she had been experiencing for several years, a simple sentence that recounts a lot: "January 19, 1943: I cannot grasp that it is already 1943; four years since this hell began." (8) After such a sentence, one would expect to read a detailed passage, or even a short description of these four years, especially when the broader historical frame of reference is the Holocaust. Instead, the reader's mind is confronted with a deviated content: "The days pass by quickly; each day looks like the previous one. Every day it's the same frozen and oppressive boredom" (ibid). The reader's cognitive dissonance caused by the content of these two sentences and the following sentences in this entry will emerge to become the hallmark of Rutka's writing and her poetics: the antilogy. The antilogy reflects the clash of the adolescent's urge for life, while trapped in a constant existential threat.

It is a well-known fact that, in the ghettos, a day never looks like the previous one. Changes were frequent and unexpected. The Jews lived in a very fragile 'routine,'
disrupted by Nazis' acts of cruelty, coupled by the oppressive presence of terror, hunger, disease and death; a deplorable reality described by Rutka herself later on in the diary. Can we really refer to these days as "boredom"? Can this description given by a teenager, who was there and who rendered it by an act of testimony without any questions be accepted? Can this first-hand testimony be questioned? The answer to these questions is ambiguous. This puzzling literary writing is characterized by the disruption of the order as well as of the content, and, mainly, of the causality expected in a written text. Rutka's fragmented writing reflects a broken word for life, growth and blooming, the very essence of adolescence and the promise of life. Her writing displays in form and content the existential crisis she underwent.

Though the text in the beginning of this entry is formally fluent, that is to say, one sentence follows the other, suggesting a textual conventional logic, it is composed of different topics raised in the same breath and almost embedded in every new sentence:

"There is great excitement in town. A lot of people are about to leave for the land of our forefathers, to Palestine…I am now reading a wonderful book called Julian, the Apostate, and The grave of the Unknown Soldier, by Strug.” (8) The "great excitement" immediately follows the "oppressive boredom," and actually contradicts it. Still, one has to refer to the 'oppressive boredom' she speaks about, and try to understand the reference to this boredom. Rutka moves from one reference to the other without any transition. She moves from her own world into the world of others. One might deduce from this textual logic that the oppressive boredom refers to her own world. Yet, readers are confronted by a second clash: a description of a great excitement and even hope. This excitement, incidentally, provokes disturbing feelings within Rutka: "mixed feelings of joy and jealousy." This excitement contravenes the oppressive boredom that characterizes her life. Apparently, things do happen contrary to the statements expressed at the beginning of the diary entry. [Bad] events occur, and frequently. Knowing that rapid changes are the main characteristics of this period, boredom seems to be an antithesis of this period.
The antilogy displayed in the first diary entry is recurrent in the other entries. It evolves and deteriorates into explicit deviation when the situation is emotionally unbearable and very hard to handle.

“February 24, 1943:
There is a temporary remission of tension in town. Who knows what will happen? There is talk of general departure to labor, Arbeitamt, for men and women aged 16–50. Once again, they hunt Communists. I don't know when I'll meet Nica. Oh yes…On Saturday afternoon, Micka came over. We went out. We met with Jumek and Mietek; a stroll with them and then we went to Mietek's.” (38-39)

In the entry dated February 6, Rutka is, both, relatively and considerably articulate. She writes about many things ranging from her reaction at the sight of a German soldier, to her probing her emerging womanhood. Then she drifts to the aktion (action) on August 12, 1942 that she happened to recall on that day, and finally she records the murder of a Jewish baby by a Nazi. This overwhelming event is recounted in a minimalist way, irrespective of the promise to pour out her feelings. Instead of the flow of words and feelings, fragments and a petrified writing render the event: three sentences enclose the terrible event she witnessed:

"I saw a soldier snatch a baby, who was only a few months old, from its mother's hands and bash his head against an electric pylon. The baby's brain splashed on the wood. The mother went crazy.” (30)

This event stored in a child's tumultuous soul for several months finds its way out on the paper and is reported in a 'matter-of-fact' manner. Though this event qualifies as the most important thing for Rutka, it is rendered in a way that mainly aims to testify to a terrible act in order to make it eternal. Emotions are muted and supressed. Only facts surface the traumatic experience. Rutka quickly moves ahead as though her efforts to store and put into words the broken world surrounding her have drained her from her energy. High self-awareness makes her able to reflect on the impact of the events that led to her being what she calls "indifferent." She is able to "split up" and comment upon her own reaction. The emotional detachment she experiences in putting this traumatic event into words is incomprehensible to her, and leads to the self-criticism that follows the depiction of the event: "I am writing this as if nothing has happened; as if I were in an army experienced in cruelty." (ibid) Along with this reflection, she cries over her youth, her innocence and the impact that traumatic events have come to have upon her. She rejects
and defies the analogy she used in the previous sentence to construe her weird reaction. "But I'm young, I'm 14, and I haven't seen much in my life, and I'm already indifferent" (ibid). Despite all what Rutka saw and experienced, she still mentions that [she] hasn't seen much in her life, referring implicitly to normal positive experiences. In the context of the deplored stolen youth, referring to the bright side of life, the statement, "I haven't seen much in my life," emerges from a narrative of normalcy. Defying the current events, her reaction arises from a normal adolescent burst of life, only to crash into the cruel fragmented world the Nazis have set for her and her people, a world of evil that transformed her into an "indifferent" person.

**Anger and Defiance**

The binary mode, ingeniously utilized here as a means of helping her cope with the situation (henceforth: coping strategy), allows her to face the imminent existential threat that runs rampant on the streets. She lives in two parallel worlds, trying to find her way in the chaotic arena that she was propelled into. Caught between two contradictory forces, life and death, growth and decay, she leads a sort of double life. Her writing reveals the external vicissitudes she goes through, as well as the internal ones adjusted to the former. As an act of defiance against the Nazis' evil intentions and crimes, Rutka refutes the external constraints that reduce her world and freeze her adolescent surge of life into a distorted spasm. Against all odds, she runs a hectic social life, rendered in an intensified way that contradicts the sclerosis of her actual life. The oppressive boredom is counterbalanced by an intricate array of social interaction that sweeps her away from the suffocating routine. The reader finds it hard to follow the spiral of the social events and incidents that marks out Rutka's life. Her relationships with her friends are rendered in fragments, although when depicting them, Rutka is remarkably more talkative compared to her "expressive sclerosis" that mirrors the traumatic acts of evil perpetrated by the Nazis. Regarding her social life, she is articulate and gives relatively more details. In the entries that detail her social life, she expresses her feelings and even plots out future events. For example: "Tomorrow I will have a word with him (Mulek) about it," (10) or, "Tomorrow I plan on going to Loleck to borrow books." (16) Life emerges from these
lines as well as energy and vitality. The existential tour de force that Rutka applies to her life is reflected in her writing. She refrains from putting into words the macabre existence in which she is compelled to live, since nailing it down in words would have ruined her. In her attempt to thwart this noxious impact on her, she creates and constructs a life, drawing on its characteristics from a safe construct, such as normalcy. Rieff, quoted in Boyd Maunsel's article, The Writer’s Diary as Device: The Making of Susan Sontag in Reborn: Early Diaries 1947–1963, mentions that "the most compelling aspect of diaries is self-making" (2). Though we deal with a different historical context and with different writers, we cannot ignore the element of self-making displayed in Rutka's notebook, a self-making individual drawing on her resources by ingeniously learning coping strategies. Rutka, in her instinctive will to live and overcome the trying period, goes through 'rearranging' the setting in which she is the main character, as a counterbalance to the lack of control in her life. In her diary, she is the one who controls her words, as well as her friends, as a compensative act in relation to the ever changing and cruel outer world. This verbal control of her life serves as defiance, as well as resistance.

Rutka's diary reveals two different persons: the typical adolescent yearning for space, freedom, adventure and love, and the well-informed Holocaust adolescent who strives hard to repress what she sees, hears and experiences. "...Now I am terrified when I see 'uniforms.' I'm turning into an animal waiting to die. One can lose one's mind thinking about this. Now, to everyday matters, Janek came by this afternoon ..."(30) The abrupt passage from the depiction of fright to the description of Janek's visit and what follows highlights Rutka's coping strategy at work. The relationships depicted constitute the frame in which the diary evolves, though in a vacillant pace and space, trying to find its diary life between two opposite forces: anger, wrapped in the silencing of words, and defiance, embedded in the urge to construct a normal life. The result is a diary that breaks its very promise and essence as stated in the entry of January 27, 1943: "I would like to pour out on the paper all the turmoil I am feeling inside, but I'm absolutely incapable." (14)
Words are broken, as well as their capacity to convey the emotions hoarded inside. They are incapable of dislodging the emotional, chaotic texture. Instead, a silence sets-in, bearing a heavy testimony against an unspoken inner-world that repeatedly pleads to be voiced. Paradoxically, the silence is audible and declarative. Its economy defies its very essence; it is rather a noisy tortuous silence. "And now I'll describe my spiritual side as well" (ibid). Rutka's narrative deviates and focuses on mundane matters, as though everything were normal. She drowns her turmoil in "noisy" wor(l)ds whose paradigms are drawn from the pre-war world. Rutka's intelligence is reflected in her writing, as well as in her insights and involvement in the resistance ghetto group, as reported by her half-sister, Zahava Laskier-Scherz.

Far from being simple, her narrative echoes Roland Barthes' categorization of his *Mourning diary*\(^6\): active/reactive. The author chose to use only the categories proposed by Barthes and their logic applied to the text, namely, the existence, or rather, the co-existence of two texts that interact/react in a dialectic way. In the case of Rutka's diary, the silencing text, *Text I*, which details her social and her adolescent moody-life in the ghetto, is reactive to *Text II*. *Text II*, which comprises the inward turmoil that suffocates and torments her, is worded fragmentarily. Although the intensive social life depicted in *Text I* may suggest otherwise, Rutka's genuine interest is directed at the atrocities she is frequently exposed to in the ghetto. These are silenced by the (articulate) *Text I*.

In Rutka's diary, *Text I* not only reacts to *Text II* by distancing memories, turmoil and the seething emotional world in which she speaks about matters concerning adolescents, but it also serves as a "safe text," a safe writing space to express and write about negative feelings, such as anger.

The entry dated January 28, 1943 opens with anger directed at herself:

"I am stupid, terribly stupid. Yesterday evening, when Nina and I walked by the old Market Square, I met Micka. She was walking with Rozka and Minda. I said Micka, and although she clearly heard me, she didn't respond and kept on walking. I cannot forgive myself for calling out to her. Now, between her and me, it's over- fìnito." (16)

This entry sounds like a conventional adolescent diary entry, except for the reference to the factory. Adolescent matters preoccupy Rutka and reflect on issues teenagers usually...
face. In this entry, the narrative is flowing, smooth and full of energy and liveliness. Anger is expressed, as well as its reason. The causality of events is closely adhered to and sounds normal, quite typical of adolescents; a teenager who is offended by her friend's behavior, namely, in her lack of attention.

In the entry dated January 30, 1943, anger is expressed on a higher scale. Rutka uses the metaphor of demons to convey in words her own frustration:

"Today a hundred demons are running wild inside of me. I met Micka and we talked about our future. In the morning, I made an appointment with Janek and Micka to meet at 4:30 p.m. I returned home from Mietek before 4 o'clock, and I was told Janek had already been here and left. He will probably not come again. Micka didn't come either. How can you not go crazy? Now, everything is messed-up." (18)

Knowing that a day before she waited for Janek, and he didn't show up, she writes: "January 29, 1943: Janek didn't come…” (ibid) The degree of anger and frustration can be comprehensible. Still, Rutka in this entry is more eloquent and unreserved. She is able to find the metaphor that reflects her tumultuous emotional state, precisely in the way that a conventional diarist would do. She even writes like a conventional teenager and uses the cliché, "Sometimes all 'the disasters' happen at once." (ibid) The quotation marks she uses in the word disasters break the conventional writing, as well as the cliché, and seem to echo the historical disasters Rutka and her people are plagued with. This connotation throws the reader back into reality, the real setting of the diary, being World War II, and where real disasters happen on a daily basis. Rutka moves from being the "carefree" teenager, who is able to rage against relatively trivial matters, into being the wise and well-informed Holocaust teenager, who is capable of differentiating between disasters. These symbols mark the polyphonous quality of the diary. Moreover, the word 'disasters' is a sign indicating the Holocaust, the all-time and ultimate historical disaster.

Ambiguity and Directness

Thomas Merton, in Reading as a Diarist, stresses the tension between the domain of secret and the desire to publish, which usually characterizes the diarist. (113-114) This tension probably affects the writing of any diary, but mainly the act of exposing oneself in writing. He assumes that a diary is a partial portrait rather than a "faithful mirror." (ibid) These assumptions underlined diaries from different historical periods and,
especially, in the Franco-American journals that Merton studied. When dealing with Holocaust diaries, namely, *Rutka's Notebook*, one has to take into consideration the acute tension between what was meant to be secret and things openly published in terms of existential threat, as well as the writer’s testimonial act in which the desire to publish emerges not only from the desire to give life to one's image, but mainly to leave a record behind via the self-image, or based on Merton's theory, the “partial portrait.”

In *Rutka's Notebook*, the “partial portrait” is rather a resistance and a coping strategy, than a conventional act of writing diaries. In this intricate context, or rather threatened writing space, the domain of secret involves different measures. This dire constellation demands that wording becomes an art of 'distorting' reality and concealing it behind tacit words. A tension between ambiguity and directness sets-in. Knowing that Rutka was well informed about the course of the war, one cannot read this diary in a naïve way. This knowledge sheds light on the ambiguity that characterizes the diary-writing and its configuration. Rutka relates her difficulty in writing openly and feels frustrated with regard to her incapacity in using words to dispel her anxiety and the emotional burden, along with the atrocities she has witnessed and experienced, and which are engraved in her heart. They interfere with her writing and even stymie it. She is rather reluctant in delivering her wor(l)ds, constrained by an invisible force. Her narrative is hesitant, unexpected and sometimes contradictory. For example, the vectorization of time, or Lejeune's "dated traces," which keeps track of the irreversible time. On page 20 of Rutka's diary, these "dated traces" constitute the sole indication about the existential link she keeps with five consecutive days. Contrary to her usual habit of writing the dates of the days, she uses the numeric dates:

31.1.43 nothing
1.2. nothing
2.2 nothing
3.2. nothing
4.2. nothing
In the *Yad Vashem’s* version, the 'dated traces' are not accompanied by any wording except for one date, 1.2. Only the dates are written. Although they do not introduce any content or daily recounts, these entries must be considered as entries. They enclose the silenced words and contents Rutka chose not to verbalize. She opts for silence though this very silence is stronger than any wording. The absence of words reveals the presence of a heavy burden whose features are kept secret, unknown. The emptiness in the 'dated traces' constitutes a silent shriek, unvoiced verbally, but voiced by the dint of the blank space. The absence of words does not convey the absence of the diarist, nor is it a reflection of her temporary lack of will to keep a diary. On the contrary, a lot of information is given by the suggestive written act of appending the dates of the silenced days. First, the basic urge to write which eschews in an aborted movement, letting the opposite of words, that is, silence, express the absence of something the reader cannot know about. Still, these five consecutive days express a lot. They tell of expectation and of disappointment. They also convey the suspense of waiting day after day for something or someone, only to be dissatisfied time and again. Contrary to the assumption that appears in the *Time Edition*, (21) Rutka did not write these dates only to keep track of time. Though she did not write from February 6 to February 15, she had the notion of time and continued to write the dates in her usual way. She did more than that. She wrote a lot: *nothing*. A single word (or a blank space) means a lot. Doubled by the antagonism she has with respect to words and to the outer world, the ambiguity that hovers over these silenced days, as well as the written indicators, can testify to Rutka's reluctance about writing what she originally intended, and her choice to keep silent. The absence of words does not equal the absence of events or emotions. It discloses secrets or unvoiced events. In a very intriguing way, right after these silent "dated traces," Rutka becomes fluent and articulate, as though she wishes to deliver more and more information and record it. The diary entry dated February 5, 1943 opens with: "The rope around us is getting tighter and tighter. Next month there should already be a ghetto, a real one, surrounded by walls." This information leaves Rutka distraught, while the readers, are perplexed. The additional information, "a real one, surrounded by walls," insinuates perhaps certain knowledge.
obtained from outer sources and testifies to Rutka's belonging to the underground, as assumed by Stanislava. A fourteen year-old Holocaust girl living in the ghetto is not supposed to compare ghettos and highlight the features of the one to come, and, above all, to predict the exact date of the building of the new one.

Rutka continues and depicts the future life in the ghetto:

"To sit in a gray locked cage, without being able to see fields and flowers. Last year I used to go to the fields; I always had many flowers, and it reminded me that one day it would be possible to go to Malachowska Street without taking the risk of being deported." (22)

In the last sentence, hope and factual life are blended; the yearning for peace and freedom is enwrapped in a macabre frame, "without taking the risk of being deported." Rutka uses a bias to describe the daily existential threat she risked.

The threat of deportation restricted her steps and 'menaced' to dismantle the relationship between all her friends. "Then it will be impossible to see anyone, neither Micka, who lives in Kamionka C, nor Janek, who lives in D, and not Nica, who lives in D. And then what will happen?" Rutka's concern is genuine and quite appropriate for her age. She focuses on her immediate adolescent life.

Still, when dealing with atrocities, she is rather reluctant and ambivalent. Her narrative is fragmented, built up of strata. Pursuing its own course, each stratum is accumulated into a distinct whole. Different layers run their course of events, shattering the testimonial act into bits of information. Three main strata are at work in Rutka's diary: 1. The social life, which serves as escapism, as well as an artificial harbor of normalcy in the chaotic atmosphere she lives in. 2. The Holocaust atrocities witnessed and experienced in different levels, narrated mainly in fragments, parenthetically rendered. 3. The daily narrating of the growth of an adolescent girl, drawn from normalcy.

This stratification enables, both, the narration and the testimonial act. By the means of spacing, the directness of testimony is allowed into the narration. The atrocities are thrown on the paper, introduced in the narrative by an artificial linguistic mechanism: "I almost forgot," or, "one important thing," or are written in midst of a theological reflection. For example, in the reflection on her faith in God, Rutka "splits" up and
criticizes herself for evoking the Lord using the second person: "Oh, good Lord. Well, Rutka, you've probably gone completely crazy. You are calling upon God as if he exists. The little faith I used to have has been shattered." The pronominal inconsistency that refers to (one speaking) person, the writing of I, namely, the passage from I to you, and back to I, reflects the rejection of I and its position as you, obliterating the polarity inherent in these pronouns.  

In her dialogue, Rutka's use of I posits itself as one who is completely "exterior to me." The speaking subject becomes the object, you, reflecting the 'double track' Rutka uses as a coping strategy. In this distorted pronominal dialectics within the subject, the writing of I sets itself in a discourse that strives hard to comprehend the outer world and its cruelty and struggles to put it into words. The shattered faith as a vector of the anger and frustration for too long swallowed, bursts out into a 'streaming' discourse vomiting hell:

"If God existed, he would have certainly not permitted that human beings be thrown alive into furnaces, and the heads of little toddlers be smashed with butts of guns or be shoved into sacks and gassed to death….or the time when they beat an old man until he became unconscious, because he didn't cross the street properly." (February 5, 1943, 22-23)

Turning her wrath unto God, she rejects him from her world as an attempt to comprehend the unbelievable course of events. She also cries out the victims' unvoiced shriek, this time sparing no one, even not herself. Although she attests previously in this entry to her indifference regarding the atrocities she has already "accumulated" in her soul, she finally pours out on the paper the horrible events she witnessed in an accumulating way, the way they were forced on her and stored in her memory.

It seems that the barrier has been removed. Rutka's unvoiced feelings emerge and are explicitly expressed. First, fear and anxiety are voiced in a metaphor of death: "The rope around us is getting tighter and tighter." (20) At this point, despair and frustration blast out, accompanied by the fright of the dreadful end that awaits them. "It's nothing as long as there won't be Auschwitz….and a green card…The end….When will it come?" (24)

Trapped in an impasse, Rutka verbalizes the imminent existential threat: Auschwitz, the ultimate symbol of death, then and now. One can only imagine the dreadful impact it had
on the Jews in the ghettos at the time. Fright, anxiety and hopelessness conflate and make way for emotions, words and testimony.

Eventually, feelings find their way out and are poured onto the paper. They dispel the turmoil and unleash the nasty influences of violence and crimes witnessed and experienced on Rutka's soul.

In the following entry dated February 6, 1943, a different Rutka emerges. Her self-awareness makes her name the abominable thing that happened to her; she is full of aggression and feelings of revenge.

"Something has broken in me. When I pass by a German, everything shrinks in me. I didn't know whether it is out of fear or hatred. I would like to torture them, their women and children, who set their doggies on us, to beat and strangle them vigorously, more and more." (24)

Settling of scores with the German soldiers through this mental image represents a covert resistance motivated by anger and hatred. Powerless, Rutka reacts mentally against the enemy, using the same patterns of aggression. As a means of "escapism," she drifts abruptly to every day matters, namely, her womanhood and her social life, trying desperately to hold on tight to her stolen youth. But, not for too long, her narrative goes back to the eyewitness mode: "Today, I recalled in detail the day of August 12, 1942…I'll try to describe that day so that in a few years, of course if I'm not deported, I'll be able to remember it." As an eyewitness present at the crime scene, Rutka delivers precious information about this past event depicting the situation, the Jews' behavior and their response to the selection. Her talent of writing, combined with intelligence and historical awareness, renders the events as though they were filmed. First, she starts from the very beginning of that day, detailing her family getting ready in their apartment, the breakfast, etc. Then, she focuses on the people on the road: "There were thousands of people on the road. Every once in a while we had to stop, in order to let the crowd in front of us proceed." (26) The directness of this testimony teaches us a lot about the way Jewish people were misled and brought to obey German soldiers' orders. Rutka continues and reports: "At half past six, we were in place. We managed to get quite good seats on a bench. We were in a pretty good mood until nine o'clock." Rutka depicts an almost serene
atmosphere in the place. Until nine o'clock. In an ingenious way of writing, she cuts both
time and scene. The text deteriorates as well as the situation:
"Then I looked beyond the fence and I saw soldiers with machine guns aimed at the square, in case
someone tried to escape (how could you escape from here?). People fainted, children cried; in short-
Judgment Day. People were thirsty, and there was not a single drop of water around." (ibid)
The analogy of the *Judgment Day* imparts with it the desolation of the Jews caught
abruptly in a death trap. Cruelty, imminent existential threat, helplessness, and
hopelessness set in. "Then I saw what disaster meant." (ibid) This direct depiction about
the dire straits of the Jews echoes deferred testimonies of survivors and resonates in
diachronic historical Holocaust scenes. Rutka's testimony written in a notebook plays a
very important role in the documentation of the Holocaust, and contributes to the
international Jewish efforts to document this dark period of human history. This 14 year-
old teenager's written testimony defies any attempt of denial. Her diary evolves into a
document that accuses the Nazi perpetrators and depicts their brutality and evil nature.

**The Desire to Live**
Writing a diary during the Holocaust constitutes also a written shriek of silence, as well
as a desire to live, voiced in a particular mode. Rutka's voice brings to us one million
Jewish children's silenced voices that were born to live and aspired to live, but
unfortunately were deprived of life only because they were Jewish. The natural urge to
live expressed by Rutka: "...despite all these atrocities I want to live, and wait for the
following day," (36) belongs also to others (who are Jewish). This powerful eagerness to
live, written in a 14 year-old Polish Jewish girl's diary, reverberates the suffocated
eagerness of one million Jewish children, that couldn't reach the wor(l)d. This metonymic
representation was probably not Rutka's intention, however, in a historical perspective
the verbal power of this sentence and its significance cannot be ignored. The first person,
I, refers systematically to Rutka. She uses I and means it. But, as a testimonial act, her
diary transcends the conventions of the diary and sets new pronominal dialectics. This very I refers also to Rutka's friends who perished in Auschwitz, eternalized in her diary.
Moreover, it designates all the Jewish children, who like her, despite the atrocities,
wanted to wait for the following day. Rutka's cry for life embedded in I is, both, diachronic and synchronic, altering I into we and they. This special voice from the Holocaust disrupts the pronominal logic and crosses through the decades' pronominal boundary, creating a very particular Holocaust equation: I = we (synchronic) and they (diachronic). I is never one. As such, it is not silenced. This written I accuses, in a belated revenge, the Nazis and inscribes their crimes in the perpetual testimonial act of the diary. Reading and learning the diary give life to I and defy all odds at the multiple attempts to silence it forever. The reader joins the cry for life voiced decades ago, and accomplishes, in a pronominal twist, a postponed verbal feat which makes the frozen wish alive.

In this aspect the homodiegetic narrator denotes a polyphonic narration, which voices the (one million) unvoiced 'narrators'. Thus, the statement, "This is torment; this is hell," (ibid) as written by Rutka, voices thousands of Jewish children in the Holocaust. It holds true for almost every piece of life depicted in this diary. Even the evocation of womanhood becomes metonymic and represents the destroyed womanhood of thousands of adolescent Jewish girls. Rutka's self-memorization becomes iconic and 'multi-self-creation' in regards to the silenced children of the Holocaust. The desire to live denoted in her voice reaches out to us, decades after she was taken to her death. This very desire resonates one million Jewish children's cry for life. One (I) for we and they. This voice reaches out to a living reader who is assigned and compelled to memorize and fuel the chain of memory. Rutka's voice is Nica's, Micka's, Janek's, Jumek's, Mietek's, even Rhoza's and Tuska's, even the girls she hated, (34) and one million Jewish children's who wanted to live and wait for the following day even if it meant "waiting for Auschwitz or labor camp." (36)

**Dreams of Freedom**

Contrary to its essence, for Rutka the diary does not always bring consolation. At times, it seems that writing adds some burden to life. Rutka takes breaks from writing. The entry March I, 1943 opens with the statement regarding her writing habits "Once again I took a long break from writing." Breaks from writing constitute a transition and a deterioration of the family/ (Jewish people) situation. Silencing the emotions constitutes an adaptation.
to the transition from one situation to another. Silence, the opposite of voicing in words the turmoil, bridges the events and the emotions. The absence of words, the break in Rutka's words, is a (present) silenced shriek. Silence in Rutka's economy introduces a new (dehumanizing) phase in the daily life of the Jewish people in the ghetto of Bedzin. In the entry March I, 1943 the break from writing follows the deterioration of housing conditions "during which we managed to reduce our apartment to one room. It's very crowded. Nobody knows where to find things." (42) Social matters break this description, 'noisy words', a recurrent pattern. "Yesterday I met Jumek." The restrictions reported in the context of her social world "there's nowhere to go to" reveal the evacuation of Jews from Modrzejowska Street "On Modrzejowska Street there are no Jews. Today we reported to the commission" as well as their dire straits.

Restrictions and Nazi laws have a bad effect on Rutka, who deplores her lost freedom. Stolen and imprisoned youth yearns for freedom, dreams of freedom. In her despair, Rutka unfolds in this entry the role her social matters plays for her in her desperate situation: "I wish I could leave all this behind and run away very far from Janek, Jumek, Mietek, my house and all this grayish rottenness." (46) In this cry for freedom Rutka wishes to get away from her present reality that denotes not only despair from the tragic situation she is caught in but also from the emotional entanglement she lives in. Janek, Jumek, and Mietek are the first ones in the long list of things she would like to leave behind. It seems that in different times she wouldn't get entangled in these social matters. They serve as "coping strategies" for Rutka who tries hard to keep intact her youth and life energy amid the existential threat that hovers over her and the Jewish people in Bedzin. They are part of what she calls "pretending." In the entry dating from March 8, she tries to identify the cause of her crying: "That's not good. I must pull myself together and not wet my pillow with tears. Because of whom I am crying? Because of Janek, certainly not. Then because of whom? Probably because of freedom." (ibid)

Freedom and life are what she cries her heart out for. Her dreams of escaping unravel her yearning for life, normalcy and freedom. Where humans fail her, she has recourse to her imagination and nature: flying birds, wind and breeze. "Spread out wings and fly high
and far away, hear the wind howling and run wild on my face, feel its breeze. Fly to places where there are no ghettos, "shops", no pretending." (ibid.)

All these elements represent movement, freedom, and carefree life Rutka is deprived of. The birds are the metaphor of freedom, recurrent in the Holocaust literature. Still, the usage of it by the multiple different authors doesn't blur the intensity and vivacity invested by each of them in it. Loading in the metaphor of the birds their personal yearning for freedom and life, it remains intact, unique, and always new.

Rutka emotions are first expressed in tears and then in words, in the diary. The turmoil is at last verbalized and poured on the paper. In the entry March 8, 1943 Rutka voices her fear as well as the fear of the Jewish people in the ghetto. She renders in her diary the dreadful situation of the Jews trapped in the ghetto of Bedzin: "I am sick and tired of these gray houses, of the steady fear on everybody's life. This fear clutches on to everyone and doesn't let go." (48)

This testimony documents the unbearable life of the Jewish people in the ghetto of Bedzin and sheds light also on the terrible human condition Jews faced in other places in Europe as well during the Holocaust. Though the descriptions are particular to Bedzin, they expand the knowledge of the atrocious emotional and physical conditions of the Jews in the ghettos in general. The daily life of individuals in the ghetto Rutka renders in her diary, covers all the aspects of the Jewish condition in the Holocaust, ranging from the physical conditions to the psychological and existential ones. Her honest depiction stresses the tangible existential threat and the anxiety that "clutches on to everybody" as well as the existential Nazi trap Jews were trapped with no apparent exit. In the entry April 24 Rutka writes "The town is already empty. Almost everyone lives in Kamionka. We will probably move there this week too." (54) Kamionka was the last station before Jews were taken to their death in Auschwitz located about thirty kilometers from Bedzin.

Rutka's diary ends the same way it begins deploring boredom "Meanwhile, I'm very bored. The entire day I'm walking around the room, I have nothing to do." (ibid.) Rutka's space is reduced to a minimum, a small room; her vitality is diminished to walking around the room all day long. Youth trapped and eventually exterminated by the Nazis.
Conclusion

*Rutka's Notebook* constitutes a very important testimony, since it is an eyewitness document that reports events that occurred in the ghetto of Bedzin, and were recorded at the time they happened. Fourteen year-old Rutka brings to us not only her own voice and distress, but also the dire straits of the youth in Bedzin during the Holocaust. This diary contributes to the research on the Holocaust and sheds light on the fate and daily life of the Jewish children in Bedzin. It teaches a lot about the coping strategies Jewish children had recourse to in the Holocaust. It also commemorates the Jewish citizens of Bedzin who were taken to their death and eternalizes some of them by their names and bits of biography. Although this diary was written by a teenager, it is of literary value and contains significant poetical figures. Rutka Laskier's voice reached the hearts of Polish and Israeli children and was able to motivate them to cooperate and overcome cultural and geographical gaps. This poignant voice has its own life and serves to this day as a bridge for people and children who are reluctant to learn about the Holocaust.

Bibliography


**Notes:**

2 I was personally exposed to this poignant voice only four years later when I looked for some material on the Yad Vashem site for a seminar I had been holding on gender issues, women's writing and the Holocaust. Needless to say, I was immediately enthralled by the content and the testimonial act of this 14 year-old Jewish girl. Nonetheless, I couldn't ignore the vivacity and the encoded writing of Rutka's notebook.
3 Note, in the entry dated from February 6, Rutka depicts horrendous events she saw or experienced. This alone of course contradicts the uneventful existence she depicts in the beginning.
4 The adjective indifferent is used also to describe the traumatic effect of the war on Lusia. "I almost forgot: today I saw Lusia, alive. She's so indifferent." p.10
5 When reading about Rutka's boredom the writer couldn't but think of Barthes' boredom in *Mourning Diary*: "As a child, I was often and intensely bored. This evidently began very early, it has continued my whole life, in gusts (increasingly rare, it is true, thanks to work and to friends), and it has always been noticeable to others. A panic boredom, to the point of distress: like the kind I feel in panel discussions, lectures, parties among strangers, group amusements: wherever boredom can be seen. Might boredom be my form of hysteria?" *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 1979. The emotion of boredom reported by Rutka in the first entry is recurrent in the last entry of the diary: "April 24 The summer is already here. It's difficult for me to sit still in the "shop". The windows apple trees and lilacs are booming, and you have to sit in this suffocating and stinking room and sew. The hell with it. … the town is almost empty. Almost everyone lives in Kamionka. We will probably move there this week too. Meanwhile I'm very bored. The entire day I'm walking around the room, I have nothing to do." (54) Rutka's last entry discloses not only historical facts about the Jews' fate but also the spirits of the very special adolescent girl who, despite her understanding of the dire situation, reacts like a carefree adolescent living in a peaceful setting. Boredom is in the focus of her concern, ignoring the imminent existential threat. Rutka's report on boredom reflects the trapped youth and energy as well as the desire to live and to be elsewhere. Can this boredom be related to a panic boredom, a form of hysteria, the one Barthes evokes?
6 See Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary*, p.43. "Actif /réactif ~ Active/reactive there are two texts. *Text I* is reactive, moved by indignations, fears, unspoken rejoinders, minor paranoias, defenses, scenes. *Text II* is active, moved by pleasure. But as it is written, corrected, accommodated to the fiction of Style, *Text I* becomes active too, whereupon it loses its reactive skin, which subsists only in patches (mere parentheses). Barthes was mentioned and cited in Maunsell, 2011, p.10.
7 The term is borrowed from Roland Barthes. It holds true for *Text II*. See Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*. 
*Polyphony was termed by Bakhtin and used by other theorists among others Roland Barthes. It refers to the many voices that reside in a text.*

*Lejeune rejected the definition of diary as an art, he defined it as praxis. Diaries are “forms of praxis, not artistic artworks” (225) See Lejeune, Philippe. On Diary.*

*In The Time edition of Rutka's Notebook, Zahava Scherz in the part called "The sister I knew" iv-5 relates that she met Rutka's best friend Stanisława when she visited Bedzin and got more information on her half- sister. Rutka is depicted as "a serious, mature young girl" (p.2) Stanisława also told Zahava that Rutka was "well informed of the course of the war and the status of the military forces, as well as the fate of the deported Jews". (ibid) According to Scherz, Stanisława thought Rutka had some contact with the anti-German underground.*

*Christian Quendler uses the term of vectorization, which refers to the organization of records in time links practices of the diary, a sense of a progressive and irreversible time that contrasts to periodical and cyclical notions of time. (p.342)*

*In the entry dated February 15, 1943, Monday, Rutka explains why she did not write (since February 6, 1943) "there was nothing to write about." Maybe she had to report only the act that the Germans have retreated from the Eastern front, which may signal the nearing of the end of the war." (32)*

*This assumption is controversial. In a conversation the author had with Menachem Lior, who knew Rutka and lived in the ghetto, he brushed aside Stanisława's assumption about Rutka's belonging to the underground. He mentioned also that they all knew about Auschwitz and what it meant for them. According to him, this information was rather taken from her imagination. He insisted that there were no walls in the ghetto of Bedzin. As for the description of the new ghetto, namely, surrounded by walls, the author asked Zahava Sherez if she could shed light on this issue. She recounted that Menachem Lior told her that he and his family were not in Kamionka and hid in a different region in Bedzin when the Aktion took place. Zahava Sherez added also that she was told that Kamionka was a closed ghetto where Jewish families lived in unbearable conditions such as fifty persons in one single room. The assumption is that maybe Rutka referred to barbed wires that surrounded the ghetto, which explain the metaphor of the cage. Adam Szydłowski, a historian and the editor of Rutka's notebook shed light on this issue and told the author in a mail correspondence that the ghetto of Bedzin was not surrounded by walls but by barbed wires. He mentioned the existence of a small wood wall the Germans built.*

*It is very interesting to see that Rutka uses the metaphor of the cage to describe the ghetto she envisages in her mind. The same metaphor will serve Ruth Sender Minsky to describe her life during the Holocaust and after the war. Her memoir "The Cage" depicts also the aftermath of the Holocaust on the lives of survivors.*

*In the entry of February 20, 1943 Rutka displays a tremendous inner exactitude and self-awareness. Her writing includes devices of ars poetica: "The town is breathlessly waiting in anticipation is the worst of all. I wish it would end already! This is torment; this is hell. I try to escape from these thoughts, of the next day, but they keep haunting me like nagging flies... I must not think of this so now I'll start writing about private matters." (36)*

*Emile Beneveniste conceives the first and second pronouns as polarities: "Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a subject referring to himself as I in his discourse. Because of this, I posits another person, the one who, being as he is, completely exterior to "me", becomes my echo to whom I say you and who says you to me." ("Subjectivity in language," Journal de psychologie.) See also Emile Beneveniste, Problemes de linguistique generale, pp.260-265.*

*Frustration regarding not only the cruel and unbearable situation they are trapped in but also concerning God's abandonment of his people.*

*When I first read Rutka's notebook, I was fascinated by Rutka's voice and desire to live. I also felt a tremendous Jewish shame with regards to the silent treatment this diary got in Israel. I was determined at the time to bring it to the awareness of the Israeli people. I taught the diary in my course and asked my students to plot out lesson plans to make this diary known by the new generation. They didn't. A year passed by. A new class was exposed to the diary and, of course, was also asked to design a lesson plan.*
Alas, in vain. My students were too busy trying to combine studies and raising their families. In the summer of that year, I decided to do it by myself. I got the idea to write an international program, which would involve at least two countries and two schools. I shared my plans with Zahava Shertz, who gave me the email address of a history teacher in Bedzin, Anita Palimaka, whom she met during her visit there. I was told that she taught Rutka's notebook at the time. I addressed Anita. She was eager to cooperate. Needless to say, I was overjoyed. I sent her the program I wrote to get the principal's permission and budget required to operate this program. It was immediately accepted. Then, I needed a partner in Israel.

With the same program, I came to my seminar in the following fall and asked for teachers who would join it. One of my students at the time, Liora Bensimon, who lives in Dimona agreed. She was given the program and promised to talk about it with the school principal. She got her agreement. Liora and I sat together and adapted it to the school program including the school's topic of that year-- language. Liora Bensimon, who taught English in Ami Assaf elementary school in this town, worked mainly with the strongest students of her English class to make this program succeed. She caused a second teacher from another school in Dimona to become interested, who willingly joined the program. Zahava Sherz, Rutka's half-sister, launched the program. She signed the diaries which the pupils of the two classes in Dimona were offered. She, parallelly, met the Polish pupils virtually. During the first year of the program, I served as the coordinator of the virtual meetings between the pupils in Bedzin and the pupils in Dimona. They met virtually once in two weeks. The pupils of the two countries got to know each other and worked simultaneously on the different topics of the program. They learned English to communicate with each other and learned about their respective cultures. They even sent each other greeting cards on special holidays. Each class filmed the town they lived in. The pupils of Bedzin filmed the different sites evoked in Rutka's diary, making them relevant for their Israeli peers and, offered them a virtual tour of Bedzin.

The program encompasses also various topics such as history, culture, literature, and also a creative part: creative writing and fine arts. The pupils of both countries were asked to write about their dreams and ambitions and to perform parts of the diary in the ceremony of the Holocaust Remembrance Day in their respective schools. In Israel, Liora Bensimon spoke to the teacher, who was responsible for the ceremonies in her school. The latter read the diary and was fascinated by it. She spoke about it with a friend, who was the stage director in the municipal theatre. A script writer was called in. Rutka's voice came to life. Dimona's municipality financed the expenses of this play. On the Israeli Holocaust Remembrance Day, Rutka's voice was first heard by 450 of Dimona's citizens, who came to pay tribute to the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis. The children of the theatre group in the city, together with the pupils, who took part in the program that year, and played in a remarkable artistic manner the different entries of Rutka's diary. The diary came to life and Rutka's voice transcended decades of silence and reached out to hundreds of Israeli hearts. Israeli children her own age, and even younger, voiced in Hebrew Rutka's torment and desire to live for the first time in history, making in a sense Rutka's dream to live in "the land of our forefathers" come true as expressed in the first entry "January 19, 1943 "We too live in the hope of getting papers." The chain of memory was set by Polish and Jewish Israeli children, who together abolished and bridged the abyss of hatred and cruelty. Together they were able to contain and deal with the horrific experiences Rutka and other Jewish children went through, using the opposite emotions and attitudes at work during the Holocaust. They proved decades after the Holocaust that intercultural encounters are able to set new models of dialogue, respect and friendship. Rutka's diary constituted also a bridge to Holocaust studies among reluctant Israeli children. Through Rutka's diary, they were encouraged to learn more about this period and to get to know Rutka's world better.