

## Survivors. Politics and Semantics of a Concept

**Veranstalter:** Center for Jewish Studies, Berlin-Brandenburg; Center for Research on Antisemitism, Technical University Berlin

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**Bericht von:** Anke Kalkbrenner, Zentrum Jüdische Studien Berlin-Brandenburg

The survivor has become a prominent figure and a key concept in history, literary studies, and political thought. But who is a survivor? And, more precisely, who is a survivor of the Shoah? The Center for Jewish Studies, Berlin-Brandenburg and the Center for Research on Antisemitism brought together scholars from seven countries to discuss the different semantic and political meanings attached to the concept of „the survivor,“ since the Second World War, and also to compare and critically analyze the different disciplinary, historical, and national understandings of the term.

STEFANIE SCHÜLER-SPRINGORUM (Berlin) welcomed the participants and guests of the interdisciplinary workshop. In her opening remarks, she drew attention to the complex history of the term „survivor,“ through the Second World War, to the immediate postwar years, and down to the present.

In her keynote lecture, „Remapping Death and Survival. Shifting Geographies and Definitions,“ ATINA GROSSMANN (New York / Berlin) explicated an important yet often-overlooked issue which is central to the history of the Holocaust: the experience of Jewish war refugees in the Soviet Union, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Indeed, most of the surviving remnant of Polish Jewry spent the war years in the USSR. Grossman explored the marginalization of this „Asiatic“ Holocaust experience from historiography, collective memory, and political culture. She noted the recent broadening of the concept of „survivor.“

Workshop organizers ALINA BOTHE and MARKUS NESSELRODT (both Berlin) used their introductory addresses to set an agenda for the presentations and discussions. Alina Bothe emphasized that the question, „Who is a survivor of the Shoah?“ can only be

addressed from within a multilingual and transnational framework, which takes into account questions of personal experiences of survival, refuge, and exile. To that must be added the inscription of Holocaust survival in cultural memory and its omissions.

Citing the Swedish psychologist Natan Kellermann, Markus Nesselrodt surveyed the difficulties inherent to defining who is a Shoah survivor and to finding and defining their shared experiences. The historiography on the „Surviving remnant,“ the *She'erit Hapletah*, has revealed how diverse political allegiances, wartime experiences, and group identities led to political, juridical, and self-attribution as remnants, witnesses, *lebn geblibene*, *ka-zetniks*, displaced persons, exiles, refugees, immigrants, and others.

These introductions foreshadowed some aspects of the early postwar definitions, as discussed in the first panel, chaired by Karen Körber (Berlin). In her paper, „Building a Community of Survivors in the Post-War Jewish Honor Courts,“ KATARZYNA PERSON (Warsaw) used the collaboration trials of former kapos to show how the honor courts set up by the Central Committee of Polish Jews and the displaced persons (DP) authorities in Germany, Austria, and Italy empowered the Jewish community not only to rid itself of „traitors,“ but also to re-establish its juridical autonomy, take charge of internal Jewish affairs, and overcome the condition of victimhood.

Panel 2, chaired by Micha Brumlik (Berlin), focused on the semantics of survival. ADAM STERN (Cambridge) opened horizons of thought about the link which ties the human subject to the question of survival in his paper, „Survival Before Auschwitz: On Rosenzweig and Christianity.“ He asked if „survival“ was a concept, one with a philosophical or even a theological genealogy. Stern discussed the messianic figure in Franz Rosenzweig's 1921 book, „The Star of Redemption“, and demonstrated its apparent prolepsis of post-Holocaust theological concerns.

In her contribution, „What did you survive? An Exploration of the Nature of Being a Survivor and the Concept of a Survival Hierarchy,“ LINDA ASQUITH (Nottingham) examined dominant narratives and key ex-

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periences within several groups of genocide survivors. She examined how survivor identities are bound up in politics beyond the physical survival of genocide. She also showed that Holocaust narratives, such as surviving Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen, hold a strong „symbolic capital.“ This, in turn, structures how survivors of later genocides like Rwanda, Darfour, and Srebrenica have talked about their experiences.

The third Panel, which addressed the politics of survival, was chaired by Michael Wildt (Berlin). SUSANNA SCHRAFSTETTER (Burlington, VT) presented on „Hidden Jews as a Sub-group of German Holocaust Survivors.“ She outlined some of the characteristics of this group and the problems that they faced after liberation. The majority of German Jews in hiding, so-called „U-Boote“ or „Submarines,“ was of advanced age and struggled with long-term health concerns after liberation. Drawing examples from the archives of the Bayrisches Landesentschädigungsamt, Schrafstetter revealed the postwar struggle of these survivors to receive financial compensation, as well as the disadvantages that most of them encountered in indemnification programs.

In his paper, „Child to be Placed with a Family who Will Appreciate his Tragic Past: Early Understandings of Young Survivors and Future Migrants' Experiences in Immediate Post-War Europe,“ ANTOINE BURGARD (Lyon / Montréal) focused on Jewish orphans who immigrated to Canada between 1947 and 1952. Analyzing the resettlement project financed by the Canadian Jewish Congress, which brought about 1,100 Jewish children to Canada and placed them into foster care, Burgard showed that Canadian authorities, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), and other humanitarian agencies imposed identities upon those children. They developed categories from above such as „child survivors“ or „unaccompanied children.“ As Burgard showed, however, individuals also managed to escape those identities or incorporate them in other categories.

The session concluded with BENNO NIETZEL's (Bielefeld) presentation on „The Jewish Claims Conference and Repatriations for

Holocaust Survivors 1951-2000.“ He offered an overview of the history of the Jewish Claims Conference (JCC), the umbrella organization for international Jewish associations, founded in 1951, to bring material claims against both German successor states of the Third Reich. Nietzel noted that Holocaust reparations had a lasting impact on the concept of the „survivor,“ as it linked it intrinsically to victimhood and material need.

Panel 4 focused on survival in literature and was chaired by Eva Lezzi (Berlin). DANIEL PEDERSEN (Stockholm) presented the first paper, „Surviving through Poetry: The Case of Nelly Sachs.“ He suggested that in the specific case of Nelly Sachs, a distinction must be made between „being“ a survivor and „becoming“ a survivor. Sachs, who fled Germany for Swedish exile in 1940 and therefore escaped „certain death,“ used poetry as an artistic means to write both „for“ and „to“ the murdered. With a critical lens, Pedersen explored the ethical implications of representing artistically experiences that one has not had and also of risking the possibility of silencing with the author's voice the voices of actual victims.

Pedersen was followed by ANDREE MICHAELIS (Frankfurt an der Oder). The latter's paper, „The Survivor as Writer and as Witness or Why Primo Levi Did not Want to Be called a 'Survivor,'“ situated these questions in the broader context of the ethical dilemmas of survivorship. Analyzing Primo Levi's oeuvre on Auschwitz and the problematic and contradictory nature of the concentration camp world within, Michaelis dealt with the moral complexity of becoming a survivor. He argued that in Levi's view accepting the status of „survivor“ would have lent him a privilege of which he was ashamed and an apparent victory where none existed.

JAN TAUBITZ (Erfurt / Berlin) gave a talk entitled „From Anne Frank to Amy Bellette: How Philip Roth Anticipated the Memory Boom and the Role of the Survivor.“ He showed how, in his 1979 novel, „The Ghost Writer“, Philip Roth anticipated the era of the survivor by transforming Anne Frank, the archetypal Holocaust victim, into the figure of Amy Bellette, an American survivor.

By depicting the same protagonist in his later work, „Exit Ghost“ (2007), Roth reflected the fear that the present culture of memory might change after the last remaining survivors pass on. Taubitz argued that the concomitance of actual loss and the associated fear that cultures of memory would change explicitly evoked and also formed the era of the survivor.

In her keynote lecture, „Survivor Made in America: Intersections of Social Darwinism, Holocaust Memory, and Popular Culture,“ ANNE ROTHE (Detroit) broadened the quality and scope of the „survivor“ as a category in the context of contemporary popular culture in America. She presented the „survivor“ as a quintessentially made-in-America figure, based in a story of ultimate success and endowed with moral capital for having overcome cultural trauma and victimhood.

NOAM ZADOFF (Bloomington) offered insight into Israeli postwar society in his keynote address, „Bridging the Abyss? Holocaust Survivors in Israel.“ He shed light on changes in the perception of survivors from the immediate postwar years to the present. Zadoff showed that the category of the „survivor“ developed only in the last three decades, as Israeli society came to terms with its past.

Panel 5, chaired by Juliane Wetzel (Berlin), returned to the core question of the workshop, „Who is a survivor?,“ from a historiographical perspective. ELISABETH GALLAS (Jerusalem) discussed the influence of Jewish survivor-historians on conceptualizing Holocaust research in her paper, „Framing Holocaust Research in New York – The Role of Survivor Historians in the Aftermath of World War II.“ In her detailed analysis of the presentations at the Conference on Jewish Relations in New York in 1949, which focused on the relationship between personal experience and historical consciousness, Gallas showed that scholars like Salo Wittmayer Baron, Philip Friedman, and Hannah Arendt were at once initiators and critics of the documentation and scholarly examination of the Holocaust.

JULIA MENZEL (Lüneburg) also addressed the question of Jewish historiography in her paper, „Between ‘Nothing’ and ‘Something’: Narratives of Survival in H. G. Adler’s Schol-

arly and Literary Analysis of the Shoah.“ Menzel cited passages from Adler’s works in which he describes survival as a moment of transition, an unfolding of the survivor’s inner self from the „nothingness“ which arises from devastating experiences to an uncertain new beginning, referred to as „something,“ which results in the reconstruction of a „subjective human self.“

The panel concluded with RENÉ SCHLOTT’s (Potsdam) exploration, „The Survivor as a Historian. Raul Hilberg (1926-2007) and Holocaust Historiography.“ Schlott detailed the figuration of the „survivor“ in Hilberg’s work with a particular focus on Hilberg’s critical approach towards survivor testimonies as a source for the empirical (historical) sciences. He reminded participants that Hilberg never excluded such sources from his scholarship.

The final panel, Panel 6, chaired by Atina Grossmann (New York / Berlin), focused on the movement of survivors. SEBASTIAN SCHÖNEMANN (Koblenz) spoke on „The Name Registry as Testimony: About the Commemorative Function of Survivors’ Early Tracing Services.“ He pointed to the collective dimensions of the names’ registries of early tracing bureaus like the International Information Office Dachau (IIO) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC)’s Tracing Bureau in Berlin. Schöнемann argued that this fact-based documentation was not akin to the commemoration or veneration of names in later (contemporary) years, but that it nonetheless contributed to the social memory of survivors at the emergence of Holocaust commemoration and research. He also noted differences between registration programs. In Dachau, the names stood for crimes and atrocities, while the registry of deportees and missing persons in Berlin drew attention to a lost community.

The workshop’s final presentation, by RAN ZWIGENBERG (University Park, PA), broadened its scope once again with an analysis of the peculiar history of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivor ethos and, specifically, the symbolic encounters of the Hiroshima-Auschwitz campaign of the early 1960s. Zwigenberg concluded his paper, „From the Ashes: Hiroshima, the Holocaust and the Rise

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of the 'Survivor' as a Moral Category," with a discussion of how the category of „survivor“ expanded and also of its relevance to the histories of the peace movement and resistance. He demonstrated that the „survivor“ developed historically as a transnational category which drew upon many sources.

In the concluding session chaired by Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Berlin), workshop organizer ALINA BOTHE (Berlin) emphasized that the papers and discussions showed once again that the „survivor“, in its multiple contexts and semantic fields, cannot be understood as a clear-cut concept or category.

Throughout the workshop, the concept of the „survivor“ was depicted as an entangled field that is highly sensitive to questions of personal and group experience, gender, class, generation, language, cultural memory, and politics.

In the discussions throughout the workshop, participants generally agreed that on a social and an individual level, the „survivor“ as a concept offers deep insights into the social, political, philosophical, cultural, and ethical transformations of the post-war era. The workshop concluded with the screening of a short clip from the popular American TV show „Curb your Enthusiasm,“ which provoked not only laughter but suggested directions for further research.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Conference overview:**

Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Berlin), Greeting  
Keynote

Atina Grossmann (New York / Berlin), Keynote-Lecture 'Remapping Death and Survival: Shifting Geographies and Definitions'

Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Berlin), Welcome Note

Alina Bothe / Markus Nesselrodt (Berlin), Introduction

*Panel 1 Who is a Survivor? (I) Early Postwar Definitions*

Chair: Karen Körber (Berlin)

Katarzyna Person (Warsaw), Building a Community of Survivors in the Post-War Jewish Honor Courts

*Panel 2 Semantics of Survival*

Chair: Micha Brumlik (Berlin)

Adam Stern (Cambridge), Survival Before Auschwitz: On Rosenzweig and Christianity

Linda Asquith (Nottingham), „What did you survive?“ An Exploration of the Nature of Being a Survivor and the Concept of a Survivor Hierarchy

*Panel 3 Politics of Survival*

Chair: Michael Wildt (Berlin)

Susanna Schrafstetter (Burlington, VT), Hidden Jews as a Sub-group of German Holocaust Survivors

Antoine Burgard (Lyon / Montréal), „Child to be Placed with a Family who Will Appreciate his Tragic Past“. Early Understandings of Young Survivors and Future Migrants' Experiences in Immediate Post-War Europe

Benno Nietzel (Bielefeld), The Jewish Claims Conference and Reparations for Holocaust Survivors 1951-2000

*Panel 4 On Survival in Literature*

Chair: Eva Lezzi (Berlin)

Daniel Pedersen (Stockholm), Surviving through Poetry – The Case of Nelly Sachs

Andree Michaelis (Frankfurt an der Oder), The Survivor as Writer and as Witness or Why Primo Levi Did not Want to Be Called a „Survivor“

Jan Taubitz (Erfurt / Berlin), From Anne Frank to Amy Bellette: How Philip Roth Anticipated the Memory Boom and the Role of the Survivor

*Keynotes Survival Post Migration*

Chair: Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Berlin)

Anne Rothe (Detroit), Survivors Made in America: Intersections of Social Darwinism, Holocaust Memory, and Popular Culture

Noam Zadoff (Bloomington), Bridging the Abyss? Holocaust Survivors in Israel

*Panel 5 Who is a Survivor? (II) – Responses by Historians*

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<sup>1</sup>Curb Your Enthusiasm – Survivor, video, viewed 21 November, 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln2XfN3hli4>> (18.06.2015).

Chair: Juliane Wetzel (Berlin)

Elisabeth Gallas (Jerusalem), Framing Holocaust Research in New York – The Role of Survivor Historians in the Aftermath of World War II

Julia Menzel (Lüneburg), Between „Nothing“ and „Something“. Narratives of Survival in H. G. Adler's Scholarly and Literary Analysis of the Shoah

René Schlott (Potsdam), The Survivor as a Historian. Raul Hilberg (1926-2007) and the Holocaust Historiography

*Panel 6 Survivors' Movements*

Chair: Atina Grossmann (New York / Berlin)

Sebastian Schönemann (Koblenz), The Name Registry as Testimony: About the Commemorative Function of Survivors' Early Tracing Services

Ran Zwigenberg (University Park, PA), From the Ashes: Hiroshima, the Holocaust and the Rise of the „Survivor“ as a Moral Category

*Closing remarks*

Stefanie Schüler-Springorum / Alina Bothe (Berlin)

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