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OLGA'S BLANKET

Trauma, Memory and Witnessing Women in the Sydney Jewish Museum

Susan Andrews

Abstract This article analyses the gendered significance of a small blanket made from human hair which was donated to the Sydney Jewish Museum by a Holocaust survivor, Olga Horak. It forms part of the museum's Holocaust exhibition where Olga works as a volunteer guide. The blanket represents a testimonial object that carries in its fabric the personal stories of women's witnessing and suffering of events of the Holocaust. This article gives a brief overview of how the Sydney Jewish Museum provides memorial and historical context to the blanket as an authentic artefact and introduces Olga Horak as an embodied witness. The museum is an already gendered space within which Olga and her personal connections with the blanket contribute to the exhibition's narrative about events of the Holocaust. The article then discusses how, in the museum context and also drawing on Olga's written testimony, the blanket is inextricably linked to traumatic past events. Olga bears witness to her own experiences of trauma and suffering and to those of other women as they intersect at a particular historical moment with the blanket's 'biography.' It has also become a significant bearer of collective memory of women's experiences of Auschwitz which are literally and metaphorically woven into it. This fragment of material memory brings the past into the present, enabling gendered explorations of Holocaust memory, through Olga's story and that of the blanket.

In a formal glass case in the permanent exhibition about the Holocaust at the Sydney Jewish Museum¹ there lies a folded, striped blanket. It seems roughly woven, with two strips sewn together, frayed at the edges and threadbare in places. Its blue/grey and white striped pattern is similar to that of the concentration camp uniform displayed nearby, a well known item of cultural memory of the Holocaust. The accompanying text panel informs visitors that the blanket belongs to a Holocaust survivor, Olga Horak, who donated it to the museum and also works there as a volunteer guide. It was given to her when she was liberated by British and Canadian armed forces in Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945. Now in her late eighties, Olga came to Australia from the former Czechoslovakia in 1949. As a young Jewish woman during the Second World War, she survived Auschwitz, a death march to Dresden and four months in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. As I argue in this paper, Olga's blanket has become a significant object not only for her personal memory, but for telling gendered stories of women's experiences of the Holocaust. This blanket connects her story to that of other women and thereby also contributes to developing a gendered collective memory of the Holocaust.

In the first section of this paper I give a brief overview of the Sydney Jewish Museum and its permanent exhibition on the Holocaust, as it provides memorial and historical

FIGURE 1

Blanket donated to the Sydney Jewish Museum by Olga Horak. Reproduced with the permission of the Sydney Jewish Museum.

context to the blanket as an authentic artefact and introduces Olga Horak as an embodied witness. I discuss the museum as an already gendered space within which Olga contributes as a Jew and as a woman to the exhibition's narrative. In the second section I discuss how, in the museum context, the blanket is inextricably linked through Olga's embodied testimony to traumatic past events. Here it is an object that contributes to the production of cultural memory of the Holocaust, understood as 'the product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences articulated through technologies and media that shape even as they transmit memory. Acts of memory are thus acts of performance, representation and interpretation' (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 5).

I draw on Olga Horak's personal testimony that she gives in the museum space and in her memoir (Horak 2000) where she narrates her experiences and those of other women as they intersect at a particular moment with her blanket, which has become a significant bearer of personal and collective memory. I then discuss broader stories that are also woven into this blanket of human hair: women's gendered experiences of Nazi genocidal practices of de-humanisation and de-subjectification, the mass slaughter of Jewish women and the collection and use of their hair for the Nazi war economy. Such stories can open up a space to reflect on the gendered dimensions of the genocide that are not fore-grounded or coherently narrated in the museum exhibit and are muted in the wider context of a transnational Holocaust memory. This small striped blanket has become a testimonial object that 'enables us to consider crucial questions about the past, about how the past comes down to us in the present, and about how gender figures in acts of memory and transmission' (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006, 353).

The discussion in this article contributes to further inquiry into the complex ways in which gender inflects and is produced by Holocaust memorial practices, in particular in the multi-textual discursive space of a Holocaust museum. As Miriam Peskowitz highlights in her discussion of gender and Jewish Studies:

[T]he problem is not that gender is absent from either the past or from our renderings of history; even a womanless history is simultaneously and necessarily gendered. The claim of such an absence is possible only when gender is mistakenly used as a synonym for women. (Peskowitz 1997, 33)

Women play a significant role in the production of memory in the Sydney Jewish Museum and it is the small blanket and its connections with one of those women that offers insights into the gendered specificities of the genocide and production of cultural memory of the past in the present of the museum.

Since the 1990s there has been important work analysing women's experiences of the Holocaust as part of a project to address their 'invisibility' in the dominant Holocaust discourse, understood as a masculine enterprise where women tended to be written about and spoken for, and subsumed into a universalised masculine Jewish experience.² There are Holocaust scholars who consider the study of women and the Holocaust to be controversial (Langer 1998) suggesting it is disrespectful to all the victims who were targeted only because of their race, because they were Jews. Sara Horowitz suggests that some 'fear that a focus on women or gender issues would eclipse the horror of the genocide' and 'that bringing sexuality into a discussion of victims or perpetrators and their respective cultures would be inappropriately titillating or voyeuristic' (Horowitz 2004, 113). Such anxieties seem to have more to do with ideas of the Holocaust as a unique and sacred event of which any critical analysis, including feminist analysis, is inappropriate or even sacrilegious. This has the effect of silencing and marginalising women and gender analysis. Even as the Holocaust is said to be unspeakable, concern about feminist critical analyses also raises questions about why it is considered appropriate to speak about and represent torture, atrocity and mass killing but not gender and sexuality.

The Sydney Jewish Museum: Gendered Spaces and Embodied Memories

Museums in contemporary Western liberal democracies are usually understood as state institutions of public importance and authority. Through their collections, buildings and displays national museums mediate many of a society's basic values, which are of course often contested. Museums as sites of the production of cultural sensibilities also promote their educational role as a significant reason for their existence, where, as museum scholar Eileen Hooper-Greenhill points out, '[k]nowledge is now well understood as the commodity that [they] offer' (1992, 2). Holocaust museums are no different. The expectation by the institution and its visitors that some knowledge will be acquired there is an underlying assumption that informs the work of most museums. How that knowledge is produced and circulated and taken up, or is not, raises issues of mediation, interpretation, and the making of meanings. In a post-modern memorial culture there are ongoing debates about different approaches and understandings of the changing role of museums, especially in the context of the challenges and opportunities of new digital and electronic technologies, and museums as sites of tourism, pleasure and gratification.³ Museum studies and new museology discourses also tend to focus on museums as state funded institutions, their responsibilities as institutions of the nation and how they produce 'publics', 'communities' and national identity/(ies) (Macdonald 2003). Critiques of the larger national Holocaust museums such as those in the US, Israel and the UK also address these issues but rarely include gender as a category of analysis (Cole 2004; Young 2004).

The Sydney Jewish Museum was established by Holocaust survivors who came to Australia after the end of the Second World War, and their Jewish community in Sydney. Since it opened as a small community museum in the early 1990s, the museum has developed into a site of historical exposition, pedagogy, and personal and collective commemorative practices that incorporate diverse roles for a range of different audiences. It has developed particular epistemic legitimacy as an authoritative institution on matters relating to the Holocaust and is concerned with the production of knowledge about the atrocities of this genocidal event. Like other Holocaust museums, it is built 'on and out of a central rhetoric of authenticity of Jewish memory and identity' (Stier 2010, 511). The Sydney Jewish Museum is located 'at the heart of the Jewish community' and the remembrance ceremonies that are performed there are primarily shaped by Jewish tradition and culture where 'mourning and remembrance of the dead are traditional Jewish obligations . . . in their form and rituals and symbols' (Raphael 2003, 177). Offering not only an archive but also a memorial, the museum functions as a site of history and a site of embodied memory, producing complex dynamics of power and gender within an apparently stable and seamless linear narrative.

I focus here just on the permanent Holocaust exhibit which is located within a larger space documenting (primarily Sydney's) Jewish community history from earliest colonial settlement to the present, as well as regular special exhibitions.⁴ As a narrative history museum, the exhibition is designed to ensure that visitors follow a linear path from the past of pre-Holocaust Jewish life, transportation to ghettos and concentration and death camps, and then liberation. It concludes with post-war and post-Holocaust survival and the renewal of Jewish communities in Australia (and Israel). With its combination of local context and a broader Holocaust history, the Sydney Jewish Museum employs a similar narrative strategy to that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

(USHMM) in Washington, which relies 'on a series of staged encounters . . . with spaces, objects and other people, which shape the visitors' museum experiences while simultaneously framing what might be called the USHMM's world view' (Stier 2010, 509). While not being a national institution of the state like the USHMM or even Yad Vashem (the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem), the Sydney Jewish Museum nevertheless draws on narrative and curatorial elements from these institutions. It incorporates them into a particular Australian national and local Jewish historical context. In this way, the Sydney Jewish Museum draws on and contributes to what Andreas Huyssen has called a transnational Holocaust memory discourse (2003, 13).

The museum's Holocaust exhibit mobilises many powerful images and different textual forms, bringing together the embodied, the performative and the pedagogic which are contained and framed by an authoritative history of the Holocaust. This enables the museum to fulfil its aim to 'document and teach the history of the Holocaust so that these events will never be repeated' (Sydney Jewish Museum website, 2011). The museum emphasises men's heroism and sacrifice during the dark times of the Holocaust. This is illustrated by two larger than life size statues that represent masculine figures of heroism and martyrdom. One is of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who worked with Jews to save many thousands from ghettos and camps. The other is of Janus Korczak who was a hero of the Warsaw Ghetto. He was a doctor who cared for orphaned children and then, on 5 August 1942, chose to accompany them on the transport to the Treblinka death camp to his own death, rather than save himself or leave them to die alone. Janus Korczak is often represented with children gathered around him and in his embrace, emphasising masculine protection and specifically his compassion in looking after children. At the same time this image highlights his and other Jewish men's perceived and actual inability to protect and save Jewish children, and the future of the Jewish people, from annihilation. His recognition as a hero and a martyr represents an attempt to recuperate a Jewish masculinity, a protective fatherhood that was shattered by Nazi emasculation and its de-gendering and de-humanising effects. He represents a tragic (rather than abject feminine) figure, a trend in post-Holocaust Jewish theology that 'valorizes masculine power crucially when accounting for a time when masculine Jewish power was being systematically humiliated and destroyed' (Raphael 2003, 27).

Scholarship and leadership are traditionally masculine realms in Jewish culture and it is Jewish masculine authority that defines Jewish religion, culture and social relations, although these are not homogenous concepts or realities. In the Sydney Jewish Museum particular men are given the power to define the moral and ethical lessons of the Holocaust. For example the museum's Holocaust narrative is epistemologically and morally authorised by the strategic placement of quotes attributed to men of scholarship, religion and the state. They include words from the eighteenth century philosopher Edmund Burke, Austrian Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal, German anti-Nazi theologian Pastor Martin Niemöller and the third century theologian Origen, as well as a quote from the eminent Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, a patron of the Sydney Jewish Museum. The quotes are placed at different points through the permanent exhibit to provide visitors with some reflections on the events represented by the text panels, photographs and artefacts. No written quotations by women are used in this way to support and reinforce the exhibition's visual and textual narrative.

Women's bodies are present in photographic images that represent Jewish victims, especially in the section about the concentration camps, including Auschwitz. The Holocaust exhibit mobilises well-known images of extreme Nazi violence and abuse of Jewish women, many of whose provenance is not stated, as if they speak for themselves merely through their iconic status (Brink 2000; Hirsch 2001; Zelizer 2001). Photos in the exhibit include, for instance, an image of women victims of Josef Mengele's medical experiments in Auschwitz, and an image of a group of children and an extremely emaciated woman being supported by the hands of unseen female attendants. These photos were clearly taken by the perpetrators and, while profoundly shocking, represent infantilised and feminised images of Jewish suffering. These kinds of images are re-circulated from Nazi records and re-mediated by museums, in film and books and now the World Wide Web.

Some feminist scholars have expressed discomfort with this practice, arguing that many of these sexualised and violent images are eroticised and thus continue to objectify women (Horowitz 1997; Jacobs 2010). This is a compelling argument about respecting the needs of women survivors (and those who died) for dignity and privacy which is also evoked by the rabbinical rule against showing or producing images of women in public. It could be argued that not including these images could also serve to maintain the invisibility of women in Holocaust discourses or at least their particular disturbing and disruptive embodied experiences. In the museum context, however, these particular women's bodies represent pain and suffering, in ways in which men's bodies do not. Janet Jacobs has grappled with the dilemma of the representational strategies mobilised at the Auschwitz museum which 'places victimised women at the centre of the atrocity narratives, fostering an emotional connection to the past that is filtered through images of women's powerlessness rather than representations of heroism' (Jacobs 2008, 222). She cautions that 'when women's bodies are the 'dramatic vehicle' through which these catastrophes are conveyed, the effects of voyeurism and sexual objectification problematise the emotive and connective value of these norms of atrocity remembrance' (2008, 223).

Nevertheless it is also important that opportunities are available for such images to be explained in terms that relate to the gendered aspects of the Nazi genocide, aspects which Ronit Lentin argues are critical to a consideration of the how events of the Holocaust are represented and remembered:

Taking into account the construction of women as ethnic and national subjects, the definition of genocide must be gendered, to include political projects involving slavery, sexual slavery, mass rape, mass sterilization, aimed through women, at 'ethnic cleansing' and the elimination or alteration of a future ethnic group. (Lentin 1997, 2)

Re-circulated in this museum space, these particular images are a problematic form of documentary evidence of Jewish suffering, through humiliated and degraded women's bodies where the perpetrators themselves can slip from view.⁵

Women's (and men's) voices are heard when they speak as survivors via the video screen testimony stations located through the exhibit and when they approach and speak with visitors on the floor. The presence of Holocaust survivors as guides and interlocutors within the museum space presents challenges to traditional museum practice where

volunteer guides are not usually so personally connected to either the events depicted or the objects on display. In the Sydney Jewish Museum they speak as particular Jewish men and women who produce different perspectives of their common experiences, not because they inherently showed different behaviours but, as Pascale Bos also notes, because 'gender is one of the important lenses through which survivors perceive and understand themselves as members of their community' (Bos 2003, 38). They narrate their stories on the screens of the audio visual testimony stations as they do on the floor, as gendered subjects who 'renegotiate their histories and produce (narrate and emplot) their own stories' (Bos 2003, 37).

In the wider domain of public Holocaust remembrance in which the Sydney Jewish Museum is involved it is more often women who take on roles of testifying to their personal memories and bearing witness as Holocaust survivors, framed and mediated by the institutional authority of the museum which is embodied by official male, often religious, figures. Although there are male Holocaust survivors working in various roles in the museum shop and on the floor of the exhibit, women more often represented this aspect of Holocaust memory on wider public occasions inside and outside the museum. In the context of the Sydney Jewish Museum, and the broader Holocaust memory discourse, Olga Horak represents an iconic figure of a Holocaust survivor. She works in the museum two days a week as a volunteer guide where she bears witness to her personal Holocaust. Olga's story and her wide public self-representations within and beyond the museum site also illustrate how her already mediated personal memories are incorporated into the institutional memorial practices of the Sydney Jewish Museum and discourses of the wider public sphere. She has become a very public figure of a woman Holocaust survivor and an important member of the community associated with the museum and even has her own Wikipedia page, where the blanket is also briefly included in her story.⁶ Reading the blanket as a testimonial object of cultural memory is necessarily inflected by gender. In the context of the Sydney Jewish Museum it is explicitly connected to Olga's personal memories of the trauma of loss but also carries the gender of genocide in its fabric.

Threads of Memory—Olga's Blanket

The blanket is listed on the museum's website as an important item in its collection. In Belsen 'it was thrown over her [Olga] by Eta, a Kapo [camp guard] from Auschwitz who Olga knew from her hometown' ('Blanket', Sydney Jewish Museum website). The website reiterates Olga's ownership of the blanket and provides curatorial, historical and personal information about its connection to Olga's particular experiences of a significant historical moment in the events of the Holocaust. Inside the museum the exhibition display panel states that the blanket is made of human hair and provides a brief explanation about the processing of prisoners on arrival at the concentration camps including that they had their heads shaved. It goes on to mention that 'the hair of Holocaust victims was used for a variety of purposes including blankets' (panel text, Sydney Jewish Museum, 2010).

The curatorial information about the blanket lends unsettling nuances to this seemingly ordinary object. It connects the human hair in the blanket with Olga and with the practice of camp inmates being shaved, while not explicitly naming the prisoners who were forced to perform these acts. But this blanket is not ordinary. It was made

by inmates of Auschwitz for the Nazi regime and was never intended to provide protection and warmth for a dying young Jewish woman; it was a blanket of death probably containing the hair of Jewish women who were murdered by the Nazis in their hundreds of thousands. A previous director of the USHMM, Michael Berenbaum, notes that:

[T]he Nazis reduced human beings to consumable raw materials expended in the process of manufacture. All mineral life was systematically drained from the bodies, which were recycled into the Nazi war economy—gold teeth went to the treasury, hair was used for mattresses, ashes became fertiliser. (Berenbaum 1990, 26)

While all Jews were degraded by these practices it was women's hair that was 'recycled'.⁷

The blanket is a potent souvenir of Olga's time in the 'univers concentrationnaire' of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. In her role as a guide in the museum this testimonial object allows Olga to weave her own story around it and through her narration she makes herself and the blanket unique. After this blanket's journey from Auschwitz to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where it became Olga's personal possession, and much later to an exhibit in the Sydney Jewish Museum, its meanings are re-mediated by its presence in this location of Jewish memory of the Holocaust. As a museum artefact it can be understood as having an 'object biography' through which its life history can be examined to 'address the way social interactions involving people and objects create meaning and to understand how these meanings change and are renegotiated through the life of an object' (Schamberger et al. 2008, 277). As well as having its own 'biography', the context of the Sydney Jewish Museum and its Holocaust exhibit brings this material remnant into the realm of 'testimonial objects enabling us to focus crucial questions both about the past itself and how the past comes down to us in the present' (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006, 355).

The blanket itself is laid out in a glass case in the section of the exhibition on the Holocaust which describes the concentration camps through images, text, survivor video testimony and authentic objects. A number of other personal objects donated by survivors from different concentration camps are also present in the same glass case. They include a wallet, a comb, a metal identification tag, a small fragment of barbed wire and a cigarette holder and pocket knife. While they are all framed as authentic 'everyday' objects from the camps, the blanket takes on special significance as an object made for use by the perpetrators, albeit now re-signified as a survivor's possession, with human material woven into its fabric. When Olga speaks with visitors in her role as a survivor guide, she further mediates the blanket's meanings for them. She includes herself in the blanket's story, thus embodying the connections between its past and her present presence here in the museum and indeed in Australia. On the occasion when I accompanied Olga on her guided tour, in her recounting of the story of her blanket, as she stood before it in its glass case, she exceeded the constraints of the linear narrative. She spoke about events in ways not always accessible through the materiality of the exhibit, even with captions. She said:

I will show you under the glass a piece of blanket. It was made from human hair and old bits of fibre, made by inmates for the Nazis. This blanket was given to me after I was

liberated, after I was found in the grounds at Bergen-Belsen. That was the only thing I had when I returned, when I was repatriated back home. Many years later I located it, I was able to trace it and I had it sent here. I didn't bring it with me . . . It is probably the only one in the world.⁸

Olga's narration may vary slightly with different groups of visitors at different times, but as she stood before the glass case this piece of material memory produced her experiences as unique. Both she and the blanket represent survival of Auschwitz. Even after liberation, with Olga near death and grieving for her mother, the blanket enfolded her in those terrible moments. Here in the space of the museum she tells this—what turns out to be partial—story with the blanket as a kind of memory prop or prompt. The blanket represents an authentic object holding threads of memory between its past and Olga's present role as a 'guide' to that past. She in turn authenticates the blanket as it authenticates her experiences. It has become a souvenir that 'authenticate[s] the past; [it] triggers memories and connects them indexically . . . to a particular place and time. [It] also helps recall shared experiences and fleeting friendships' (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006, 367). Olga did not speak about other women's experiences to the group that I accompanied on their guided tour in the Sydney Jewish Museum, but in her memoir she tells a more complex story involving women who are also connected with the blanket (Horak 2000). Like a recurring motif of both horror and nurture, it becomes associated with her mother's death and other women who, caught up in the nightmare of these events, both abandoned and cared for Olga.

Witnessing Women

Olga's story begins in 1939 in Slovakia with the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws that proscribed the lives of her family and the unfolding events of war and German occupation. Her sister and her father were transported to Auschwitz in March 1942 (Slovakia was one of the first occupied countries to hand over its Jewish citizens to the Germans). After exile to Hungary with her mother and other family members, she returned to Bratislava in spring 1944. She was shocked at her family's subsequent denouncement as Jews and they were transported via Sered to Auschwitz where her father and her sister Judith had already been killed. Olga gives a moving account of her arrival at Auschwitz with her mother in September 1944. Amongst the noise and chaos Olga noticed women prisoners:

. . . well dressed in leather jackets and leather boots. They had armbands with the word KAPO printed on them. I saw one of them using a whip on the new arrivals urging them to hurry up. I stopped breathing. It was a girl I knew, Eta, who had been in the same class as Judith . . . I was disgusted at what I saw, and yelled out, 'Eta! What are you doing?' (Horak 2000, 38)

Eta stopped what she was doing and looked at Olga: 'Olly, believe me I am not human anymore. I am an animal' (Horak 2000, 38).

Olga notes that she did not meet Eta again until she was in Bergen-Belsen months later. She makes no comment on how Eta, a young Jewish woman from Bratislava, comes

to be beating other Jews in Auschwitz, or why Eta survived for more than two years in the camp where Olga's sister and father were killed. Eta's comment resonates with those male Jewish prisoners whose moral choices were reduced to zero in the camp environment, especially the *Sonderkommandos* (special squads) who were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria, and who have also spoken of living for months and years 'at animal level' (Levi 1988, 56). In Olga's story Eta can be seen as representing a young Jewish woman inhabiting Primo Levi's 'grey zone'.⁹ Levi writes eloquently about how many Nazi victims, primarily men, were forced to become collaborators in a deliberate strategy by the Nazis to 'shift the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence' (Levi 1988, 34). They inhabited a grey zone that represents the space which separates the victims from the perpetrators, a space that is not empty but, as he writes about his time in Auschwitz, is 'studded with obscene or pathetic figures ... whom it is indispensable to know if we want to know the human species' (Levi 1988, 23).

Memory of Maternal Loss

In October 1944, as the Soviet army approached from the East, the Germans sent Olga and her mother to the eastern German town of Kurzbach and then forced them to march to Dresden via Gros Rosen and Breslau concentration camps. They were then put on a train to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where they barely survived for four months until the Allied troops liberated the camp in April 1945. Liberation was a very mixed experience for Olga and is profoundly connected to her mother's death. As Primo Levi notes, 'the hour of liberation was neither joyful nor light hearted: for most it occurred against a tragic background of destruction, slaughter and suffering' (1988, 52). The death of Olga's mother has inexorably become entangled in her memories of the blanket. It is a significant object of mourning for her as it is a constant reminder of the losses of her past in the present of the museum. In the terrible moment when her mother collapsed Olga pleaded with her not to leave her alone.

What I dreaded most happened ... My mother had survived Auschwitz, a death march from Kurzbach to Dresden, the journey to Belsen and four months in that cesspool, only to die moments after being registered as a survivor. (Horak 2000, 74)

After her mother's body was taken away Olga and her cousin Ruth unsuccessfully searched for her among the thousands of dead lying around the camp. She writes that 'to this day I have never come to terms with the loss of my mother. I carry this pain with me always' (Horak 2000, 76). The museum's website information also connects Olga with the blanket by drawing on her testimony where she speaks of the death of her mother:

I was liberated from Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945 by British and Canadian soldiers. I was sick with typhus and my weight was 29kg. People did not know how to respond; some laughed, some cried, some screamed. It should have been a happy day but for me it was one of the saddest. Tragically my mother died that day while standing at a table, waiting to get a displaced person's card. They carried her out on a stretcher and I never

saw her again. I was determined to survive in order to bear witness. ('Blanket', Sydney Jewish Museum website)

Confronted with the pain of her mother's loss and the horrors of the huge piles of bodies awaiting urgent burial, for Olga 'the memory of those days is impossible to forget' (Horak 2000, 76). In a move that shocked her, her cousin Ruth then took a woollen coat from Olga that she had scavenged from one of the many dead bodies. 'Evidently she thought I was going to die and so I would have no need for such a warm coat. I was too sick to resist or struggle. I fell back on the floor and huddled in my rags' (Horak 2000, 76). On the day after her mother's death Olga again encountered Eta, commenting that, in contrast to her own terrible condition, she 'looked well and was among the first group of DPs to be repatriated' (Horak 2000, 76). Olga then goes on to describe how she acquired the blanket and its profound significance in her memory of her own survival, but tinged with pain and grief for her mother:

Eta H, the former Kapo, saw me and covered me with a blanket. The blanket had been hers in Auschwitz and she no longer needed it as she was returning to her former home. Eta's 'particular rug' was a greyish-black and dirty-white striped blanket, coarsely woven. On closer examination I saw it was made of human hair and recycled old fibre. I considered the blanket to be very precious and it was now the only thing to keep me warm. With my precious blanket, I somehow clambered up onto an upper bunk ... I called for my mother, crying from the overwhelming sense of loss, loneliness and misery. (Horak 2000, 78)

Olga does not comment further on Eta's act of kindness, even a maternal gesture, despite the horrific conditions. Perhaps this was Eta's way of atoning for all the terrible things she had been forced to do in order to survive. In that moment perhaps Eta became human again. What happened to Eta and what could her story tell us about the Holocaust? It is a story of a different kind of survival, perhaps equally terrible. She represents a figure of a Jewish woman who, like so many others forced to make impossible choices, might problematise the gendered dichotomies of good and evil,¹⁰ victims and perpetrators on which much Holocaust memory discourse so often relies.

The blanket, 'Eta's particular rug', continued its journey with Olga as she made a slow recovery in the months following liberation. From being an object made with material from victims' bodies for use by the perpetrators, the blanket had become an object providing security and nurturance to a fragile young Jewish woman survivor. Olga took her blanket and clogs, her only possessions, with her from Belsen to the State Hospital in Pilzen. There she says 'I covered myself with my blanket and with the clogs on my skinny feet, I fell asleep' (Horak 2000, 85). In the hospital she met another patient, a woman called Bozena Bendova. Bozena was a Catholic woman who shared her food with Olga and became her 'first true friend since the horrors began' (Horak 2000, 87). After being discharged, Bozena took Olga to her home where Olga recuperated under her care before she was finally able to return to her home city of Bratislava. It was there in Bozena's apartment that she left the rug Eta had given her. Bozena's generosity and friendship helped Olga back to life when she was totally alone and had been given up for dead by her cousin. Presumably it was from Bozena that Olga finally retrieved her blanket that now rests under glass in the Sydney Jewish Museum.

These stories of women's suffering and loss, survival, difficult choices and profound friendships can all be told with this blanket. In the museum space, however, there is not much time on a guided tour for delving into complexities, as there is a strong imperative by the guides to move visitors through the larger narrative. This blanket containing women's hair has profound connections to these women's stories as well as to those many absent women who are only present through their hair in the blanket.

Interwoven Memories—Women's Hair as the Raw Material of Memory

The blanket represents a testimonial object and is a bearer of traumatic memory and mourning for Olga as well as offering some further insights into different women's connections with the blanket's story, its biography. The blanket's particular provenance can also be re-inserted into part of broader Holocaust history, the Nazi practices that Jewish inmates experienced on arrival at Auschwitz and other death camps. On arrival in the camps both men and women experienced the forceful and publicly humiliating removal of body hair. American sociologist Nechama Tec has observed from her research with Holocaust survivors that the removal of hair did not seem to be recounted by men as being traumatic. She notes that this assault was particularly traumatic for women and was 'closely tied to their feelings of femininity and sexual identification and was felt as a blow to both' (Tec 2003, 126). In the context of Holocaust memory discourse the shaving of women's hair is often represented visually and textually and holds potent significance for what happened to women in the camps, almost as a synecdoche for all the abusive bodily assaults that they experienced. As Sara Horowitz muses in a reflection about the ethics of representing women's violated bodies in Holocaust memory discourse, 'certain aspects of the Holocaust for women—for example nakedness in front of strangers, exposure and shaving of genital hair—connect even atrocity of a non sexual nature with a sense of sexual violation' (Horowitz 1997, 210).

At a video testimony station in the museum's section about the camps, one woman, Judith Nachum, described her arrival at Auschwitz and having all her body hair, including her private parts, shaved by a man as being 'so awful, I will never forget it as long as I live'. In her memoir Olga describes in some detail her experience of the selection process including being 'deloused' and shaved. In an implicit questioning of the racialised practices of the Nazi regime and their attempts at dehumanization of Jewish people, she wondered why she should be 'deloused', as 'we are clean, civilized and cultured people'. For 17-year-old Olga 'the shaving was even more humiliating than standing naked before Mengele'. Again pointing to vexed questions of prisoner collaboration she was brutally shaved by a female inmate who 'had a nasty grin on her face. She took the blunt clippers and cut off my curly, shoulder length hair' (Horak 2000, 41).

The blanket also represents an object located at the intersection of the machinery of death and the machinery of war. Its material origins are with slave labour in the camps and the mass slaughter of Jews before it came to be owned by Eta the Jewish Kapo, who took it from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen where she gave it to Olga. In the context of Holocaust historiography and memory, a blanket made of human hair holds many meanings. People familiar with the objects and artefacts which are displayed in many Holocaust museums or their photographic representations in film and literature, already know about the particular potency of human hair and its origins. In the extermination camps (Treblinka,

Belzec, Chelmno, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Madjanek, Sobibor) Jewish male prisoners of the Sonderkommando¹¹ were forced to cut the women's hair before they were about to be sent into the gas chambers, and sometimes afterwards. The section of the Sydney Jewish Museum where the blanket is displayed also shows a photograph of bales of hair ready for shipment to Germany that were found after the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops in January 1945. But no specific connection is made in its caption with the blanket nearby in the glass case, nor is information provided about the provenance of the hair. While I acknowledge the limits of curatorial space and visitors' time, nevertheless the opportunity is not available to the visitor to examine any further aspects of gendered genocidal practices of the Nazi regime.

The actual hair removed from women's bodies, and the bolts of woven cloth made from that hair are most prominently displayed in large glass cases at the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum in Poland. Janet Jacobs argues that such display is deeply problematic as it contributes to the sexualisation of women's memory and that

[A]s a disembodied artefact, remnant hair, more so than any other relic, transports the observer into the personal horror of the victim whose shaved and burned bodies can more intimately and graphically be imagined in the presence of this surviving relic. (Jacobs 2008, 222)

These curatorial issues become ethical issues. They were at the core of the recent controversy around exhibiting women's hair from Auschwitz in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington (USHMM).¹² The debates turned as much on issues of gender as they did on scientific or religious concerns about whether hair constitutes human remains. Oran Baruch Stier has claimed the hair's 'metonymic power resides in its relationship to the acts of the perpetrators and not its link to the human beings (women, it must be noted . . .) from whom it was shorn' (Stier 2010, 526). Indeed it was women survivors of Birkenau (the women's camp at Auschwitz) on the museum committee who were most vehement in their opposition to shipping human hair from Auschwitz to Washington, one saying 'I do not want my hair, or my dead mother's hair displayed as part of any exhibition' (Stier 2010, 527). Now the USHMM exhibit contains a photomural of the 'hair shorn from the heads of female prisoners at Auschwitz-Birkenau as displayed at the National Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau' (Stier 2010, 529), acknowledging its gendered provenance. In a discussion of very different memorial locks of hair, albeit also with connections to Jewish family histories, Nancy Miller states that her 'heirloom cannot stand alone in a meaningful way, except as a marker and bearer of memory itself: the locks of hair perform an act of remembrance' (Miller 2008, 167). Like Olga's blanket, 'the hair cannot . . . testify to the experience it accompanied. But as a keeper of the locks, I can bring them into language, into the world of lost stories of which they so eloquently speak' (2008, 167).

Conclusion

Olga's blanket continues its strong symbolic association with her experiences as a Holocaust survivor as she bears witness to that past in the present of the museum and in her memoir. A cropped image of the blanket has now been used on the front cover of the recent German edition of her memoir, published in 2007, extending the trajectory of

the blanket's stories over time and space, with Olga, from Auschwitz to Australia and now back to Germany (Horak 2007). In the Sydney Jewish Museum the blanket made with human hair is an object through which different women's experiences can be remembered and brought into a consideration of the gendered dynamics of genocide. It has profound connections to women's individual stories as well as to the unknown women whose bodily remains—their hair—are literally woven into it. Its interpretations are framed by the processes of remembering, through recollection, mourning and bearing witness, and highlight how gender figures in those practices of representation. Attending to the gender of genocide and the gender of remembering is important for what comes to be understood as knowledge about the events of the Holocaust and their continuing impact in the present.

NOTES

1. The full title of the museum is the Sydney Jewish Museum. Holocaust and Australian Jewish History. I refer to it as the Sydney Jewish Museum (SJM).
2. Anna Reading gives a comprehensive overview of this work in the introduction to her book (2002, 10–16). Important texts include Rittner and Roth (1993), Ringelheim (1997, 1998), Baumele (1998), Ofer and Weitzman (1998), and Baer and Goldenberg (2003).
3. For an excellent discussion and critique of debates in museum studies, see Witcomb (2003).
4. See the Sydney Jewish Museum website for more details.
5. This continues to be a vexed issue. See Prager (2008, 19–37).
6. In 2005 Olga Horak also featured in a story in the *Australian Women's Weekly* (Leser 2005), and on the current affairs program *Sixty Minutes* (Hayes 2005).
7. See the US Holocaust Memorial Museum website images identifying 'bales of hair from female prisoners . . . ready for shipment'. Primo Levi refers to the Sonderkommando who 'were entrusted with running the crematoria . . . to cut the women's hair' (Levi 1988, 34).
8. Personal notes taken during Olga's guided tour, Sydney Jewish Museum, 7 February 2003.
9. See Petropoulos and Roth (2005).
10. See Horowitz (2005).
11. See Grief (2005).
12. See Greenwald (2006).

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