Memorializing Lost Lives: A Review of The Commandant of Lubizec

STEPHEN J. GAIES

We are in the twilight of the Holocaust survivor era. Survivors themselves speak about this unsentimentally and wonder how our memory of the Holocaust will be affected when there are no longer any living links to the event. Eyewitness accounts number in the tens of thousands, but most of the writing now being done about this event is by historians and other specialists; by the descendants of victims and survivors; as well as by novelists and other professional writers.

Notwithstanding all the writing and films about the Holocaust during the last several decades, some parts of the landscape are much less familiar to the general public than others, and although the number "six million" is immediately recognizable, only specialists and dedicated students of the Holocaust can explain the stages by which that total was reached. A big part of the terra incognita of the Holocaust is the subject of this novel: the three Operation Reinhard death camps—Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor—that went into operation in the spring and summer of 1942 to implement the so-called Final Solution in occupied Poland. Operation Reinhard was one of the most lethal phases of the Holocaust; in roughly a year and a half, as many as 1.7 million Jews were murdered in these three camps. By the end of the war, only 130 or so survivors of these camps were still alive.

Patrick Hicks's novel *The Commandant of Lubizec* aims to make this part of the Holocaust better known to the general reading public. The narrator of the story of Lubizec, a fictional composite of the historical Operation Reinhard camps, plays multiple roles. Hicks has said that the "voice of the narrator" came to him early on, within the first few hours in his writing of the book, enabling him to make progress on a work that at one point he'd had to put aside because of the emotional intensity of the project.

The narrator is first and foremost a storyteller, and the main storyline centers on the camp commandant, Hans-Peter Guth, whose life trajectory is a microcosm of the Nazi regime and the history that produced and shaped it. Because of the unfamiliarity of most readers with Operation Reinhard, the narrator also has the voice of a historian or history professor. In a 2014 interview, Hicks explained how he wanted to make his novel an entryway to encourage readers to go beyond Lubizec and into the history of these camps:

> I . . . knew at an early stage that I wanted the narrator to sprinkle in footnotes and cite historical documents throughout the story. Many of the books and interviews that appear in my novel are real, so readers can follow the narrator's trail of breadcrumbs if they want to find out more about Operation Reinhard, which I hope they do. All of this makes it read like nonfiction. It's almost as if Lubizec were a real place.

Hicks also presents history by putting information from sources into the mouths of the characters and by recasting historical sources, including eyewitness testimony, about the Operation Reinhard camps as accounts of the fictional Lubizec.

Many of the characters from whose different perspectives we learn the history of Lubizec—not just Guth, but also his wife and children, his officers and guards, a few of the prisoners who survived, and even civilians living in the vicinity of the camp—have historical counterparts. It's no coincidence that the surnames (Franz, Niemann, Oberhauser) of some of the officers in Lubizec are identical to those of prominent SS officers who worked in the Operation Reinhard camps. But it would be as wrong to read *The Commandant of Lubizec* as a roman à clef as it would to read it without regard to the history on which the fictional Lubizec is based.

This is because Hicks views fiction not simply as a vehicle for presenting history, but as a tool to frame our understanding of Operation Reinhard—and the Nazi genocide as a whole—in ways that other kinds of writing, including firsthand testimony and historical analysis, cannot, or do not, do. There is perhaps no better example of this technique than Chapter 16, entitled "Passover."

In January 1943, Guth is encouraged by a newly arrived officer to provide entertainment by having the prisoners enact a Passover seder, a ceremony that is soon to disappear along with the entire Jewish presence in Europe. Guth and other officers arrive drunk at the prisoners' barrack and select a number of prisoners to perform the seder with food and wine they have brought. When Chaim Zischer, one of the prisoners, points out that Passover isn't until April, Guth responds, "Do it now. You won't be here in April."

Hicks was originally going to have the prisoners celebrate Passover secretly as an act of defiance—as actually occurred in Dachau and other camps—but he decided for several reasons to have Guth and his officers force the prisoners to do it. In this way he could expose Guth's and the others' almost total ignorance of the way of life they were seeking to destroy; in Guth's words, "We want to see your Jew rituals and how you celebrate—what's the damn thing called again?"—or, as Zischer thinks about it, "The Germans destroyed without bothering to learn the basics of what they hated. It made no sense. What was the wellspring of their hatred?" In addition, the seder, as created in the chapter, becomes the turning point in the narrative. The first act of defiance is the reciting by one of the prisoners of the kaddish, or prayer for the dead (which of course the Germans didn't recognize as such), which has nothing to do with the celebration of Passover but

everything to do with Lubizec. The prisoners know this, but their tormentors don't; thus the first shift in power. Then, spurred by the ridicule and humiliation heaped on them by Guth and his officers and by Guth's chilling statement about April, a small group of prisoners resolves to seize control of their own fate (mirroring the uprisings in Treblinka and Sobibor in August and October 1943, respectively).

Fictional imagination is also critical to the narrator's third role, as a memorializer of lost lives. The novel is in part a sustained and unfailingly respectful evocation of the lives of the normally nameless victims—note that the book is dedicated to "The Unknown"—as living human beings; so, for example, we learn about the meeting, courtship, and happy years in the marriage of Chaim and Nela Zischer, and we can no longer think of Zischer only in the identity of "prisoner" forced upon him in Lubizec.

The most compelling example of memorialization in *The Commandant of Lubizec* is the description of death in the gas chamber. No one lived to tell what it was like to be locked in a gas chamber in an Operation Reinhard camp, so Hicks imagines the thoughts and feelings of the music teacher David Stawczinski, of Gisela Wilenberg and her daughters, and of all the other named and unnamed victims who died on one particular day in the summer of 1942 in Lubizec—people who, for Guth, were "just numbers," but who, as the narrator points out, are the story of the Holocaust that is typically omitted:

> The absolute unrelenting horror of the Holocaust is dulled because we know that eyewitness accounts by their very nature are stories of life. But Lubizec was not a place of life. It was a place of clockwork murder and annihilation. To understand it we need to read hundreds of thousands of stories just like David Stawczinki's, and then we need to imagine each of them dying.

Hicks has stressed that he "spent [a long time] coming up with identities and foibles and desires for so many of these characters that enter Lubizec and are dead within fifty minutes. I wanted the reader to feel *wounded* that these souls had been taken from us."

The narrator is often unapologetically directive about how we should think about the characters and about the very effort to represent Lubizec. For example, as we read about the growing tension between Guth and his wife Jasmine, who is so frustrated by Guth's refusal to tell her what is really taking place in Lubizec that she threatens to take their children with her back to Berlin, the narrator demands that we focus not only on the marital discord between Guth and Jasmine, but also on the significance of how she writes about it in her (fictitious) unpublished diary:

> We want Jasmine to be outraged that her husband is killing people on an industrialized scale, but instead she is angry that Guth is totally disinterested in the two of them being a married couple. She wants a shared life but he is distant, aloof, and slippery. While she may have qualms about "burning people" in Lubizec . . . it isn't the killing that bothers her—it's the burning of corpses. How the corpses came into existence hasn't crossed her mind yet. This is why she can say, "You're burning people in there" and not "You're killing people in there." It is an alarming gap in her thinking.
>
> At no time does she wonder about the thousands of people murdered at Lubizec, and this makes reading Jasmine's diary obscene.

Elsewhere the narrator directs attention to readers rather than the characters. Toward the beginning of the book, the narrator insists on our understanding the variety of forms of participation in mass murder:

> This, we should note, is the face of evil, this studious man working late into the evening. In any other setting he would just be a building site manager, but Guth was a true believer in Nazi ideology as well as an excellent administrator. With his typewriter and pen he was able to kill hundreds of thousands of people. We must never forget that killing took on many forms in the Holocaust and that these crimes weren't confined to a single place like a gas chamber. Guth was very good at his job. His desk became a weapon of mass destruction.

Hicks also provides us with a meta-view of the work, frequently underscoring the challenges of representing the Holocaust—a concern voiced by Holocaust survivors (and victims) themselves as well as their descendants, from Warsaw Ghetto diarist Chaim Kaplan's *Scroll of Agony*, through Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Daniel Mendelssohn's *The Lost*. As Hicks's narrator puts it, "Words fail us. Language fails us. Our own imaginations fail us."

At several points, the narrator ponders the paradox that a story about Lubizec is a representational presence about a place that demands a language of "destruction and absence":

> Perhaps the best way to understand the Holocaust is to imagine a giant book and then watch it get erased, word by word. . . . As a point of reference, this book holds over 81,000 words, but if each of these words were to represent a human life, that is still only a tiny percentage of the millions who disappeared under the Nazis . . . . we need a language that isn't there. We need to think of absence. We need to imagine words being erased. Murdered.

Vasily Grossman, the Soviet journalist who was one of the first people to see the abandoned camp of Treblinka, produced a report (later submitted as evidence at the Nuremberg Tribunal) describing the abandoned camp as "a story so unreal that it seems like the product of insanity and delirium." Among the many achievements of *The Commandant of Lubizec* is its re-creation in readers who are removed in time and space from Treblinka of those feelings of utter discomfort and disorientation. By design, there are no safe zones in *The Commandant of Lubizec* to which readers can retreat. The novel offers us no vicarious sense of triumph in the narration of the revolt or in the memories of the prisoners who escaped alive, nor does it offer a false message of redemption.

*The Commandant of Lubize*c ends in 2008 with Chaim Zischer, the last living survivor, sobbing before a stone monument in a ceremony marking the sixty-fifth anniversary of the uprising. His sole consolation was the presence of his children and grandchildren. To them, as to Zischer—and to us—Lubizec "cries . . . from the ground and haunts our understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to be civilized." ❐