# Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka*: Reading Fiction and Fact

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Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka* is a documentary account of life at the Treblinka extermination camp, based on written evidence and on interviews with survivors. It is a serious attempt to convey the nightmare existence of the deportees whose task it was to run the camp by helping with the destruction of their fellow Jews. But, in order to do this, it has to come to grips with the strange, topsy-turvy nature of the death camp, with a world in which lies are presented as truth, and fiction as fact.

The book begins by depicting life in the ghetto of Vilna, and it shows that relations between Jews and non-Jews are based on certain conventions that both sides read accurately and accept. The basic rule is: "If a Goy hits you . . . bow your head, and he will spare your life" (18). The inhabitants of the ghetto learn to read the signs associated with the occasional pogrom, to react in the manner expected of them, and to survive. When the Nazis arrive, they change the rules: the Jews must still accept violence and persecution, but they will no longer survive. In order for this to be done with the minimum of fuss and disruption, the Jews must be persuaded to misread the new rules, and to continue to believe that they will be spared.

The Jews are therefore presented with a new "text" and are induced to misread it. Instead of debasement and death, they are persuaded to read hope of survival; instead of lies, they read truth. Steiner's account of this process becomes an astonishing (and horrifying) description of how fiction is passed off as fact. As it lays bare the techniques used by the Nazis to do this, it provides a commentary on the misuse of signs and the corruption of language.

The first step in the Nazis' fraudulent enterprise is made possible by the fact that, in Steiner's words, the Jewish mind "is inclined to attach more importance to the manner of stating a problem and the manner of solving it than to the solution itself" (22). The Nazis exploit this trait by presenting the inhabitants of the Vilna ghetto with various courses of action that all lead to the same end. So intent are the Jews on deciding which course to take, that they read these different courses of action as "choices." When they are herded out of the ghetto, for example, they are split into two groups at a crossroads, and they are so concerned with deciding which road will lead to safety that they do not realize that neither of them does. They are later given a further series of "choices" involving different types of work permits. A state of mind is produced in which signs that normally indicate "compulsion" are read as indicating "choice."

At this point, Jacob Gens, the chief of the Jewish Police, starts to play a major role in the propagation of untruth as truth. Although powerless, he is decked out with a uniform and given the trappings normally associated with a police chief: an office, a desk, and subordinates to carry out his orders. Deceived by these signs, he believes that he can do good for the population of the ghetto, and that he has real power and influence with his masters. He cooperates with the Nazis, thinking that it is for the "good" of the Jews. He betrays the leaders of a revolt in order to "protect" the ghetto, and the inhabitants themselves, equally misled by the signs, help him. The Jews of Vilna have accepted the fictional code and actually see Gens as a protector.[1] They are now unable to recognize the truth, and, when a girl escapes from an extermination camp and arrives in the ghetto, they refuse to believe her story. One old man, who obviously realizes that her story is true, still prefers to accept the Nazis' fictions. In the end, the girl herself denies her own experiences. Meanwhile, Gens spreads his influence to other cities, sets up similar police forces, and creates his own "kingdom." In this way, "Vilna became the toy capital of this make-believe empire" (61).

[1] I use the word code here in Barthes's sense, i.e., "une des forces qui peuvent s'emparer du texte (dont le texte est le réseau), l'une des Voix dont est tissé le texte" 'one of the forces that can take hold of a text [and of which the text is the grid], one of the Voices from which the text is woven' (Barthes 28). The Nazi code structures the text that is imposed on the Jews of Treblinka just as the five codes discerned by Barthes in Balzac's *Sarrasine* structure the text.

By the time the survivors of Vilna reach Treblinka, they are in a state of mind that regularly presents lies and deception as truth, and they fit neatly into life in the camp. According to Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The fictitious element of camp life—its pervasive unreality—was calculated to confuse and disarm the rational faculties, making camp prisoners more pliable to their masters and hence more vulnerable to the diabolical system in which they were trapped" (8). Steiner's descriptions of Treblinka bear this out.

In Treblinka language assumes strange new properties. Signifiers are divorced from the signified to which they normally refer, and words undergo strange semantic shifts akin to the ones that one critic has noticed in Charlotte Delbo's account of Auschwitz.[2] The prisoners are referred to as "workers"; the hut adjacent to the mass graves is "the hospital"; the gas chambers are "factories"; the latrines, where prisoners suffering from typhus go to hide from the guards, become known as "the house of rest"; the room where women have their hair shorn off is the "hairdresser's salon." In this world, men become dogs and dogs are called men. When the commandant catches a prisoner "slacking," he sets his dog on him saying: "Sieh mal, Mensch, dieser Hund arbeitet nicht!" 'Look, man, that dog isn't working!' (166). Sometimes this use of signifiers conveys humiliating references to the Jewish religion. Camp No. 2, where the corpses are buried, is the "Holy of Holies," and the road leading to it is "the road to Heaven." The man who is supposed to keep prisoners from staying too long in the latrines is dressed as a synagogue cantor and designated "*Scheissmeister*" 'shit master.'

It is the Treblinka railway station, however, that represents the highest point of the art of misleading signifiers. The buildings are disguised with artfully painted false doors and curtained windows, with ticket windows, train departure boards and a clock. A station master's office, a toilet and first and second class waiting rooms are also provided. This is a whole battery of false signs that seem to indicate safety and normal existence, but, whatever train destinations may be indicated and whatever la-

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[2] See Kingcaid. It is also interesting to note that, according to Steiner 136–51, the German language has been permanently affected by the violence done to it by this misuse of signifiers.

bels the doors may bear, there is only one real destination: the gas chamber. All this is designed to prevent panic by luring arriving deportees into misreading the true nature of Treblinka until it is too late.

Those who organize this world also exhibit misleading "signs." The man who is first put in charge is Max Bielas, a sadist and pederast who gets a partly mystical and partly sexual pleasure from the suffering he causes. The administrative commandant is also a sadist. Paradoxically, these are not what is wanted at Treblinka. The people who dreamed up Treblinka are "technicians" who fear that such passions might interfere with efficiency. They even show a "humane" concern for the Jews, whom they wish to exterminate with the minimum of suffering. They ask themselves: "Why should the Jews be made to suffer when animals are not?" (56). Not surprisingly, they replace Max Bielas by Lalka, another cold and calculating technician. Lalka is not the usual antisemitic, but someone who sees Treblinka as a factory that must deal with as many people as possible in the shortest time. His emotions are not involved. Yet he is not totally "inhuman:" he loves music and creates a Camp orchestra. The expert who is called in to help dispose of the corpses once the graves are opened is another such "technician." A timid, clumsy, somewhat ridiculous man, he knows exactly how to construct the best kind of pyre. He is a "good-natured little man incapable of hurting a fly" (359), who is totally unaffected by the sight of mass graves.

The strange world created by these men reaches a paroxysm of lies and pretence as its end approaches. In order to distract the prisoners from the realization that the Camp will soon be destroyed, and them with it, the S.S. invent all kinds of "entertainments": boxing matches, plays and sketches, concerts, music hall turns. Every Sunday, there is a "Sunday celebration" (292). Some of the women who arrive on the trains are allowed to live, and the privileged prisoners are permitted to visit them. These men, in the midst of their degradation, begin to dress carefully, to wash, and to preen themselves. Some are allowed to "marry," and parodies of Jewish weddings are arranged. In the face of death and despair, people fall in love and marry, expressing their continued attachment to life and to rebirth. In this "world of death and delusion" (362) Jews and S.S. even become

"friends." In the evenings, prisoners gather to sing songs, and the S.S bring their wives, and sit listening. We are told: "This did not prevent the S.S. from killing the Jews during the day, but the prospect of having to part company soon mellowed them a little" (371). Likewise, Jews and Ukrainian guards get together to dance and play music, and the text comments: "In the two thousand years that Jews and Ukrainians had been living together, this was the first time they found themselves gathered together around a campfire" (373).

Treblinka becomes a world that is a negative reflection of the "real" one, a world in which signs must be read as pointing to something totally different from their usual referents. Steiner writes: "Structured, organised, stratified, disciplined in the image of the other, this world was its negative, its shadow, its reflection, its projection" (220). The text itself copies the Nazis' use of signs, enters into the spirit of their code. When Lalka is faced with a particularly thorny problem and "his" Jews are uncooperative, he is referred to as "poor Lalka" (172). When he is harassed and makes errors of judgement, we are told: "It is necessary to understand Kurt Franz" (284). His reorganization of Treblinka is presented as a series of "interesting" innovations, and the difficulty of burning corpses is an abstract technical problem. When the S.S. realize that they must soon leave Treblinka, we are asked to share their sadness: "Ah! How difficult life is!" (371).

It is not just on the level of language that *Treblinka* mirrors the fictional devices used by the Nazis. Despite the fact that it presents itself as "history," it is saturated with techniques that one normally associates with fiction. The reader is soon struck, for example, by the text's abundant use of dialogue. Page after page record lengthy conversations of which there cannot possibly be written records, and which survivors could not remember in this detail. The text even goes to the length of reporting conversations that took place long before Treblinka was set up, such as the one between Adolphe, one of the leaders of the revolt, and his sister, on the day when she marries into a Gentile family. Such conversations, it must be emphasized, are not occasional devices, but a major means of narration.

Certain inmates of Treblinka are treated as the main "characters" in a story. Steiner, like the traditional "omniscient" author,

enters their minds, reads their thoughts and explains their motives. This is not presented as the historian's speculation based on documents, but as what actually goes on in their minds. The text takes us inside the heads of the "technicians" who set up Treblinka, and explains their desire for efficiency. It recreates the reasoning of men like Galewski, Kurland and Adolphe, the leaders of the revolt. Lalka's past as a failed musician, as a cafe waiter who is sure he is worthy of better things, as a mediocrity who succeeds at nothing, is described in order to explain his instinctive affinity with the Nazis. Once we have got to "know" these characters, we follow them in turn, experiencing each one's hopes and fears.

In the midst of the main story are certain "digressions." One whole chapter (18) is devoted to a character's escape, to what befalls him outside the camp, and to his return. There are also two "love stories." But these digressions serve a purpose: they are typically "fictional" devices designed to show the contrast between the outside world and Treblinka, between man's ability to feel nobler emotions and the human degradation of the camp. Such contrasts are continually made by the text, as, for example, when it switches from description of the arrival of spring and the sounds of peasants working in the fields, to the inside of the camp.

The text never spares dramatic effects. (A theatrical metaphor is even used to describe the last days of Treblinka, when "the curtain was falling on the next-to-last act of the drama" [374].) One might quote as just one example of such effects the scene in which Adolphe and Djelo enter Camp No. 2, where the corpses are burned. The text adopts their viewpoint and presents the horrifying unfolding of a scene new to them and to us. The heavy door opens "as in a dream" (345) they enter, halt in their tracks as they see the open graves, the mechanical diggers scooping up the corpses, the barely human figures working around the graves, and the leering faces and contorted limbs of the burning bodies. The revolt itself goes through a series of intensely dramatic crises as plans for it are almost discovered, suffering inmates are tempted to betray it, and events force it to be postponed on two occasions.

*Treblinka* is not, of course, unusual in its use of these techniques, for nonfiction often adopts such devices to make the

narrative more "real" or "dramatic." However, in this case, we must see these fictional techniques against the text's exposure of Nazi fictions. By proclaiming itself as nonfiction and then breaking this promise by using fictional techniques, it mirrors the Nazis' use of lies; by its own devices it deconstructs, as it were, the ones used by the Nazis to create their fictional world at Treblinka.

The inmates of Treblinka too learn to enter into the spirit of the text that is imposed on them, to read it accurately, and to use it for their own purpose. They realize that the true "story" must be told, that the Nazis' lies must be exposed. In order to achieve this, as many Jews as possible must survive to tell the story. It is this need to survive and bear witness, coupled with the realization that Treblinka will soon have served its purpose and will be destroyed, that finally leads to the revolt. The duty to bear witness is a thread running through much holocaust literature. As Elie Wiesel puts it, "I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it, this is what Jewish tradition teaches" (201). Galeweski uses the same argument in persuading inmates not to commit suicide: "We must live to tell the story. . . . You must have only one thought: to get out in order to tell the living, to warn them" (118).

In order to tell their story as it really is, the inmates of Treblinka organize a revolt and a mass escape. They decide to rewrite the story of Treblinka. They begin by pretending to accept the code and system of signs imposed on them, but only to appropriate it for themselves and to subvert it. By pretending to play the Nazis' game, they write their own "plot," in which Jew is cast as hero and S.S. as villain. Throughout *Treblinka* the Jews are referred to as "a stiff-necked people," a strange appelation, since they are made to bend their heads and keep their eyes on the ground. For the German guards, the bent neck signifies "Jew" and "submission." The Jews learn to use this sign to lull the Germans until such time as they become again a "stiff-necked people" and give their own meaning to the sign "neck."

Even before Treblinka some Jews learn to use the fictional code for their own purpose. The Resistance in the Vilna ghetto gets one of their number, a woman called Lydia who looks typically Aryan, to find work with the Gestapo. Betrayed by their own fictional beliefs about typically Aryan characteristics, the

Gestapo accept all the signs that Lydia is one of them. The first widespread use of this technique at Treblinka comes with the typhus epidemic. The inmates successfully hide the fact that they are nearly all sick, maintaining a fiction that is as unbelievable as the Nazi one. The most sustained use of the Nazi code against them takes place when it is clear that Treblinka will soon be destroyed. The inmates pretend to join in the festivities, for "In the upside-down world that was Treblinka, amusement had become a duty" (336). Fortified by this successful fiction, a man like Adolphe denies appearances: he is actually stronger than the men who beat and humiliate him. He is able to look at Lalka and think: "He, the contemptible little Jew, the little Jew from the ghetto, the sub-human vermin, was undermining the fine edifice built by the big blond officer."[3]

The Jews become adept at reading Nazi fictions and turning them to their own use. An S.S. guard drops a gun where he is sure it will be found. The object of this pretended accident is to see if the Jews will keep the gun, thus indicating whether they are preparing a revolt. Kleinmann, one of the Jewish leaders, successfully "reads" this fiction, and has the gun returned to the guard. The latter is now sure that his fictional constructs are safe. Another masterful use of the fictional code comes on the day of the revolt, when Galewski addresses the inmates, as he does every day before they go to work. His words are full of double entendres that have meaning for the inmates, but that the guards do not seize. He ends by exhorting the Jews: "Our masters the Germans have kept their promises, and we who have been here a long time know what they have done for us. It is up to us to keep ours, and to do our work well" (393).

The revolt itself is the supreme "fiction," a denial of "reality" as the Nazis see it. When the idea of starving prisoners fighting tanks and trained soldiers first occurs to Langner, he decides: "It was madness." Then he realizes: "But now [he] lived in a world of madness" (183). The Jews have to convince themselves not to accept the fiction that they are incapable of fighting. The text continually reminds the reader how "impossible" the revolt is,

[3] "Lui, le petit Juif méprisable, le petit Juif du ghetto, la vermine, le sous-homme était en train de miner le bel édifice du grand officier blond" (283). The translation is mine since the passage containing this quotation is missing from Weaver's translation.

but eventually the impossible becomes real as the Jews become masters of the Camp. In the very last scene of the book the Germans pursue Kleinmann's group across open ground, but his group jumps in a ditch and fires on them. The book ends with the strangest "fiction" of all: German soldiers running from Jewish prisoners.

The Nazis become victims of their own fictional code, which excludes the possibility of a Jewish revolt. Even Lalka, the master manipulator of signs, is duped. When he discovers the gold set aside for use after the revolt, he cannot believe that the Jews would use it for this purpose. He prefers to attribute this hoarding of gold to typical Jewish love of gold for its own sake, since that fits his fictional view of Jews. "He had become the prisoner of his handiwork," we are told (239). As Adolphe points out, it is precisely this inability to escape from their own fiction that leads the Germans at Treblinka to misread the Jewish pretence of submission: "It was because it seemed improbable that we did not want to believe in the reality of extermination until it was too late. They will have as much trouble imagining a revolt as we had conceiving of the extermination" (255).

Steiner's text encourages the reader, like the prisoners of Treblinka, to read fiction for what it is, and to distinguish it from fact. Paradoxically, this painstaking reconstruction of historical events becomes a commentary on the devices of fiction. At the same time, while using language honestly and accurately to describe experiences that most readers can barely imagine, it demonstrates how language can be distorted to convey what is patently untrue. In a sense, it imitates the world of Treblinka, but only in order to awake in the reader an awareness of truth.

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