

Believing the unbelievable: to what extent has the British publishing industry shaped public awareness and memory of the Holocaust?

Jennifer Elliott

Abstract

This article focuses on the post-war setting of Britain, from 1945-onwards, and the impact the publishing trade has had upon the British public's awareness of the Holocaust. The impact of different publishing mediums will be explored and further analysed to understand how this has affected public memory of the Holocaust. Three key texts will provide a framework and extensive historical and political backdrops will be explained. The extent of the publishing industry's role will be fully outlined; from the initial discovery and filtration into the British media and up to current modern publishing trends.

Key Words

Publishing, Holocaust, Bourdieu, MOI, Empire, British public, Allies, World War Two, Primo Levi, Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel, *The Jewish Chronicle*

“Books offer the means whereby civilization may be carried triumphantly forward.”

Winston Churchill (Brophy 1942)

The term ‘Holocaust’ and its depth of meaning did not exist following the surrender of Germany. In 1945 the dimensions of the ‘Final Solution’ were largely unknown to the British public. Post-war Europe was economically shattered and ideologically fractured, battling disrupted communications and disputed borders. For the Jewish victims the written word became a pivotal means of expressing oneself. Diaries, journals, and letters all crucially recorded the experiences of life during the Holocaust.

Escapes from the concentration camps were rare but not unknown, in February 1942 Szlamek Bajler escaped from the Chełmno camp and reached the Warsaw Ghetto. His account to the Jewish documentary group Oyneg Shabbos later became known as the Grojanowski Report. The report was smuggled by the Polish underground, who had Swedish businessmen carry the report on rolls of 35mm film, to London in 1942. On June 2nd 1942, the BBC broadcast the news that the Germans had murdered 700,000 Polish Jews (D.Kassow 2007, 298).

Further reports of a Nazi plan to “wipe the Jewish race from the European continent” (Laqueur 1980, 74) reached the allies through many channels; Reigner’s cable, Bund party communications and Jan Karski’s eyewitness account among others. The news of the Final Solution broke through and with it came a myriad of responses. For this reason it is difficult

to build a coherent picture of how the increasing narratives were made known to a wider public. Alan Mintz applies a constructivist model which helps clarify the dilemma:

Even though philosophers and theologians may view the Holocaust as a world-transforming event, the cultural systems of particular societies are slow to absorb such an event and do so only within the terms of that particular culture. (Mintz 2001, xi)

The meaning that any individual finds in Holocaust literature must be attributed to the 'cultural lens' one perceives it through. The memory of the Holocaust will be shaped entirely differently in Poland, Germany, Britain, and America due to the cultural conditions prior to the outbreak of the war. The cultural lens adopted throughout this article will be British; specifically examining the publishing industry and the extent of its role in diffusing literature representing the Holocaust.

Much of the historiography on Britain and the Holocaust points to a list of failings. Britain was notably accused of anti-Semitic attitudes and Hamerow (2008) believes this accounts for the government's delayed and hesitant response. In defence of this argument others present the case that British people were in a state of disbelief and could not entertain the callous extremity of the Nazi regime. Additionally it was later revealed that former SS personnel were allowed to reside in Britain (Cesarani 1992). It seems that Britain, at best, has an ambivalent memory of the Holocaust, which has been influenced by the

interministerial rivalries and opposing moral and political positions of all parties involved in World War Two. But to what extent did the British publishing industry shape this ‘hazy’ memory?

In Britain the immediate route of information to publication was through the press. The Ministry of Information (MOI) was the central government department in Britain responsible for publicity and propaganda. Walter Laquer formulated in *The Terrible Secret* that the official consensus from the MOI, headed by Brendan Bracken at the time, was to ‘downplay’ the murder of the Jews and refer to it only sparingly; common disbelief was a motive for this censoring. Laquer supports this with a statement from a senior officer of MOI, who wrote in 1942: “I personally don’t know if there is a ‘corpse factory’ or not, but most people believe there is not.” (R Frazer in Laquer 1980).

The control of the MOI over the media was far from absolute. The editors of leading British newspapers were certainly less hesitant than the politicians and there were frequent references to the ‘Final Solution’ in *The London Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* throughout 1942. However, the British press encountered a resistance to the learning of such harrowing things and learnt that positive news sold papers better than negative.

In *Beyond Belief*, Deborah Lipstadt found a pattern of ‘soft pedalling’ prevalent in the British and American press. Such concern for the sensibilities of their readers meant that the press overlooked the historical significance of the subject. Lipstadt concluded that the British

press, from liberal to conservative newspapers, did manage to arouse the interest and concern of the public and those that held a position of influence such as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Information made available to the public was accurate, furthermore it was unaffected by the pressure on the space available and the wartime paper shortage. "All was known, all was printed and all was believed" (Sharf 1963, 5), this seems to be the consensus of historians and critics alike. What began to creep into the newspapers, which could be seen as the beginnings of this ambivalent public memory, was not only a need to rationalise the actions of the Nazis, but a need to evade it and dissociate oneself from it.

English historian, David Ceserani, advises that to gain an understanding of the Holocaust genre, we must place it in an order: the first wave of literature was published immediately after the war up to the end of the 1950s. On the 2nd of September 1945 the war officially ended and the Nuremberg Trials began in November, they continued for the next 10 months. Writing about this period tends to emphasise an oversaturation of reports, broadcasts and articles written about this subject. The British public began became "tired of the meticulous attention to detail and there was relief when they finally finished" (Sharples 2013, 32).

The first histories of the Second World War, such as *Life's Picture History of World War II* published in 1950, did not mention the extermination of the Jews at all. This has led to the assumption that its subject was marginalised by British publishing houses or that the victims were silent – too traumatised to speak. Was this really the case? This myth of silence seems

to be unfounded with the appearance of numerous testimonies in Europe and America. They seem to be forgotten because most were written in Polish and Yiddish, and thus never entered the Western canon. Perhaps the public turned away from the testimonies because of the raw and urgent nature of the writing, which included graphic descriptions of squalor, rape and cannibalism. At this point in time, the Jewish survivors were writing cathartically, and not with an awareness of its historical significance. Dutch Jewish survivor Elie Cohen wrote in his 1952 study, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camps*, "Though it is only a very few years ago, that the survivors left these camps...and the world learned of the horrors that had occurred, interest in them is very much on the wane." (Ceserani 2011, 29).

Historically this was an anxious period for post-war Britain. It was a sustained time of political change, straddling the old world and the new. With the Cold War on the horizon and the descension of the iron curtain, Britain was keeping an eye on the rest of the world. The government was intent on promoting to the outside world a new democratic order which elevated the individual above the state and drew away from the legacy of the War and the Holocaust.

Book publishers were equally tense and struggling with paper shortages, lost stock, mobilized staff –and because of these shortcomings –failure to meet with the growing demand for books. In fact, in most house histories of publishers at this time, very few pages are devoted to war and even fewer, if not any at all, to the Holocaust. Stanely Unwin's *Publishing in Peace and War* summed up the hour with: "The chief feature of wartime

publishing has in fact been the prolonged struggle in defence of books with one government department after another” (Holman 2005, 17). Paper restrictions meant that competition for the raw materials was fierce, the MOI capitalised upon this when they offered 50% of the necessary paper to publishers under the condition that they produced books of British propaganda. This propaganda was selected by the MOI and meant that they became the ultimate authority on what was published and translated at this time. Britain’s focus was on rebuilding the British-occupied zone in Germany and providing books for the liberated territories in Europe.

Book publishers were involved in the export of English literature to the overseas markets in servitude to Britain’s interests and their own; this was the priority at the time. It does not necessarily mean that the publishing industry was intent on marginalising the Jewish victims or of failing to make the British public aware of their experiences. British publishers were following reading trends and it seems the public had tired of the explicit accounts and press coverage. For this reason it took years for some Holocaust testimonies to trickle into England, others never got through. Vasily Grossman's extraordinary accounts of the Holocaust only appeared in English in the mid 1980s.

Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi encountered this mentality when he struggled to find a publisher and was rejected in 1947 by Hamish Hamilton and Andre Deutsch (Thomson 2003, 307). He attributed this to the lack of interest in his work, “post-war Europe has been through difficult times of mourning and reconstruction and the public did not want to return

in memory to the painful years of the war that had just ended.” (Levi 1993, 381). In fact Martin Evans (1997) reports in *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* that during the 50s only two novels were published in the UK which were solely about the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe; John Hersey’s *The Wall* (1950) and Ka-Tzetnik’s *House of Dolls*(1956).

This attitude began to transform throughout the late 1950s with the publication of the English translation of the *Diary of Anne Frank* in 1952. Eventually the diary was translated into over 50 languages and sold over 25 million copies worldwide (Kopf 1997, 6). Doubleday published the diary in America with an introduction from Eleanor Roosevelt (it was actually written by the editor, Barbara Zimmerman). Valentine Mitchell (which was the publishing wing of *The Jewish Chronicle*) published the diary in Britain- with an introduction provided by Storm Jameson. The diary was rejected by several British publishers, (10 according to Evans 1997, p.5) Secker & Warburg among them (Lee 2003). After publication it received positive reviews but still failed to attract a readership and was out of print by 1953. In a private letter to the translator- Barbara Mooyaart, Barry Sullivan of Valentine Mitchell explained the necessity of Jameson’s introduction: “...in England, Belsen is a hazy, almost ‘historical’ fact and the word is often used in jokes” (Lee 2003).

Otto Frank, Anne’s father, was disappointed with the sales in Britain, not because of monetary motives, but because he wanted the British public to read Anne’s words. To borrow Bourdieu’s terminology (1996), he realised its symbolic capital and value as a historical document. Otto wrote his disappointment to Sullivan, who in turn tried to

alleviate the situation by accounting for the low sales with the “definite turning away from books which deal with the deep and poignant aspects of war” (Kopf 1997). Otto was not convinced:

Had I known that you wanted the book so badly mainly on account of its commercial outlook, I never would have entrusted it to your firm, I am not the only one who regards it as a disgrace that this book is not available on the English market. (Lee 2003)

David Kessler, the managing director responded:

...5,000 copies have been sold and, in the circumstances, I do not regard that as a bad figure. We are not in the least ashamed of what we achieved. Publishing conditions in different countries vary and it is no use to think that a success in one country necessarily portends a success elsewhere. (Kushner in Evans, 1997, p.7)

Valentine Mitchell rejected a second print run and as a result the diary became unavailable in Britain. In 1954 Pan Books published the diary as a cheap paperback. The first two editions of the diary ran to 75,000 copies (Lee 2003) and by 1971 Pan’s paperback had sold a million copies (Windsor 1971).

However, in order to achieve these sales, the diary had to be marketed to the British public not as an account of the Holocaust, but the writings of an adolescent girl. The diary was effectively 'westernised' to make it more appealing to a post-war audience. The peritext of Pan's edition demonstrates this: the pink front cover sells itself as "the intimate record of a young girl's thoughts" (tiKit.net 2010). Furthermore in Hutchinson's 1960 school edition the epilogue – when Anne was sent to Bergen-Belsen – was cut. By removing the horror of the camps the text was made more accessible to the British public. This suggests that publishers were responsible for distorting public memory of the Holocaust. Evidence of this lack of public awareness can be found in 1958, when in a letter to the editor of *The Observer*, the British MP Captain Delargy refuted the claim that the facts of Auschwitz were 'well-known.' He recounted how a Cabinet Minister had remarked that he actually thought that most of the deaths in the camps were caused by overcrowding and epidemics. "The real facts" Captain Delargy declared, "are not well-known - they ought to be." (The Association of Jewish Refugees 1958)

Eventually Primo Levi found a publisher in 1959, Orion Press., who fashioned a new title: '*Survival in Auschwitz.*' Levi's work was pushed forward as an incisive chronicle of his incarceration in Auschwitz. Honing in on everyday life and eclipsing the bigger issues at the heart of the event. However, Levi worked very closely with the translator and it is doubtful that he would have allowed any concealment of the truth. Perhaps because the publisher emphasised the autobiographical nature of the work, the sentimental aspects of it were again 'softened' to the reading public.

Another survivor, Elie Wiesel endeavoured to get his manuscript published. Again, Wiesel encountered several rejections-including Kurt Wolff of Pantheon who claimed they had “always refrained from doing books of this kind” (Donadio 2008). A small American publisher called Hill & Wang picked up *Night* in 1960. It sold 1,046 copies in its first 18 months on the market (Cargas 1993 , 23). Like Anne Frank’s diary before, the work was championed by an intellectual; the popular French author and Nobel Prize winner François Mauriac. *Night* was originally published in Argentina, in Yiddish, and it was an 800-plus-page memoir. The American edition is 109 pages long. Wiesel said in 1972 that he “cut away, but to the sensitive reader it is all there” (Cargas 1993, 103). Many have seen this as an indication that the published version was watered down for the public– losing some of its autobiographical nature. By 2011 *Night* had sold six million copies in America alone, and was available in thirty languages (Franklin 2010, 69).

These three examples are not a true representation of the masses of Holocaust works released post-war. Rather, they have been chosen because they are prominent in the British memory of the Holocaust. The publishers assimilated manuscripts into a successful formulaic pattern, which then became accessible to the British public. Authors began to pick up on this too and deliberately changed their endings towards heroism and pathos. In this manner, book publishers are unquestionably involved in the shaping of British cultural memory. “It is not surprising that publishers like neat, packagable narrative structures”

(Kushner 2006, 288), narratives that do not include the horror of the camps or pay heed to the Jewish question. This doesn't mean that works which did confront these issues, like Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys* (published by Ziff Davis-America) were not available to the public. They just weren't picked up by the larger publishing houses or publicised.

In the early 1960s there was a turning point in cultural attitudes towards the Holocaust which can be sourced to the complex political workings of Zionism. This shift prompted an explosion of films, memoirs and novels. Additionally Holocaust museums and memorials were opened - marking the beginnings of a secular liturgy to commemorate the Holocaust.

The British public started to consume this material showing a deep fascination with its subject, but other issues have arisen with the flourishing of the genre. Publishers are often concerned with the matter of authenticity. The Demidenko and the Wilkomirski affair (both in the 90s) caused publishers to take a cautious approach to works claiming to be 'memoirs.' Fictitious accounts of the Holocaust have propelled the subject into popular culture and blurred the distinction between myth and reality. The public's awareness of the Holocaust has been shaped more by popular representations than memoirs and testimony; as the latter is in the remit of the historians. As most popular representations are fictitious or have been censored, either by the author or editor, then it is undeniable that their circulation has affected the public's knowledge and understanding of the subject.

Today there appears to be a race to document the stories of the remaining survivors. Eventually the genre will no longer include first-hand testimonies and eyewitness accounts and they will pass into history. For historians this rush to record is motivated by an awareness of the significance of the Holocaust, but for publishers is it the case too? Similar to their post-war stance they may well be following reading trends; what Sharon Monteith (2002, p. 24) calls an ‘appalling fascination’ with trauma narratives. In capitalising upon this notion publishers are part of the process of sensationalising the suffering of others, even making profit from it. However it should be recognised that most survivors of trauma write their experiences for therapeutic reasons. The issue is not simplistic at all; it suggests a mutually beneficial relationship.

“All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage” (Adorno 2000, 367). According to Adorno, cultural architects (like publishers) have produced misleading work and it should be disregarded. All of it has gone through a process of careful selection, thus creating a ‘safe’ selective memory which is comforting to the public. It is not a true representation but a British interpretation. The Holocaust genre has formed its own cultural field in Britain; it contains agent groups and individuals competing to give shape to definitions and understanding of the Nazi genocide in the context of British culture. Publishers, editors, authors, critics and even readers as arbiters of cultural taste have all had a role in forming this cultural field. Like the differing political stances of the newspapers, conservative to liberal, there are different levels of involvement of book publishers in shaping public memory of the Holocaust. Publishers with Jewish connections like Gollancz,

Weidenfeld and Paul Hamlyn had a personal reason to campaign for the Jewish cause, whereas non-Jewish houses had none. The termination of the British mandate in Palestine added another layer of complexity in public opinion. It is the mainstream publishing houses, which have had the biggest impact upon the public's perception and memory of the Holocaust, as they market to the masses. Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural production investigates the fields of restrictive production, whereby literature is published for symbolic gain, and large-scale production, which favours economic gain. Bourdieu's theory is too simplistic to apply to the production of Holocaust literature, which is not purely for commercial and financial reasons. Rather it is vindicated by a need to record history, a moral responsibility and intrinsic political and religious circumstances.

Post-war publishers rejected manuscripts and denied the consecration of the genre; most English translations originate from small American publishing houses, not British, and moreover those that were published were diluted. It seems that, in processing such a horrific event, an elementary instinct comes into play— making something unfamiliar into something familiar. To this extent, the British publishing industry has had a definitive part in shaping the British memory of the Holocaust.

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