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### “Telephoning” the Past

Stories are passed from generation to generation. We learn from those who have lived before us. But in listening to the experiences of our elders, we engage in a game of “telephone”: how do we discern absolute truth? Where did particular stories originate? How can we authenticate what we are told if we were not physically present to experience it ourselves? One of humankind’s greatest faults is changing (or even losing) history in translation. As we study the pasts of our families, our nations, or our world, one thing we must be aware of is the credibility of different sources. When it comes to issues like the Holocaust, there is a blurred line between unquestioningly taking every primary account as true, and too harshly judging what victims have to say about such situations. While such traumatic events are labeled sensitive subjects, we must also remain wary to where these stories originate, and how they may present biases or untruth.

The diary of Saartje Wijnberg offers readers a glimpse into the personal experiences composing the terrible event that is the Holocaust. Her entry entitled “Sobibór, 9 April 1943” offers us a snapshot into her world when war trauma was all she knew. Although we cannot be certain of her motives for keeping a diary, one assumption might be for her own memory’s sake. Often when someone writes in a journal, the intent is that someday those experiences can be relived or shared with loved ones. Rarely is one’s main motive for writing so that many strangers can read private thoughts. For this reason, we can likely assume she is being honest as she writes down her thoughts. Most of what she says is observation-based, without mentioning much about her emotions at the time. However, without an explicitly stated audience, we cannot be certain of what her intentions are for writing. We are confident this entry notes a date in 1943, giving her

credibility in the field of Holocaust sources. We know that she arrived at Sobibór in the spring of 1943, and assuming that the date on her journal entry is correct, her descriptions of first reaching the camp by train could be quite accurate.

Saartje Wijnberg, who is later referred to as Selma Engel, grew up in the Netherlands from the time she was young until she was 21 years old. In 1943, she was taken from her home by train to a location called Sobibór, a death camp notorious for a scarcity of survivors left at the end of the war. Saartje and her husband Chaim Engel were two out of about one hundred who lived to share their stories post-Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> While at Sobibór, Saartje faced racism, illness, beatings, and was witness to familial separation, taunting, and even death. In a recent (1990) interview with Saartje, she repeatedly claims that at such a young age, her naivety played a major role in her recollection, both then and now, of experiences in the 1940s.<sup>2</sup> Because she was healthier than the average prisoner, she was sent to the work camp, where she sorted through belongings of others. At the time, many workers at Sobibór were tasked with collecting items among the packs of those who had been murdered.<sup>3</sup> The expectation was that anything of value would be stored in a warehouse on site to later be transported to Germany to be used or resold.

As she was deemed fit to work instead of being sentenced to death, she was simultaneously a witness to many typical Holocaust atrocities; she journals about men being split

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<sup>1</sup> “Holocaust Sources in Context: Diary of Saartje Wijnberg,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. accessed 8 October 2017, <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/diary-of-saartje-wijnberg/collection/holocaust-diaries#>

<sup>2</sup> Linda Kuzmack, “Saartje (Selma) Engel Wijnberg: Interview with USHMM,” *Holocaust Education and Archive Research Team*, last modified 2007, <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/survivor/selma%20engel.html>

<sup>3</sup> “Holocaust Encyclopedia: Sobibor,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, accessed 8 October 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005192>

from women, mothers being separated from children, smells of smoke, women's heads carelessly being shaved in anticipation for the gas chambers, and people being beaten and murdered within the camp.<sup>4</sup> In her diary, she writes of the three different camps composing Sobibór: the first is where prisoners sleep, the second is where labor takes place, and the third is the killing center. Saartje's memories of this location are on par with more modern assumptions of the camp; the first part includes administration and housing, the second entails storage of belongings of the victims and preparation for the third part, where (often unknowing) victims were forced into the gas chambers and thoughtlessly thrown into a shallow mass grave.<sup>5</sup> Saartje's account lines up with claims of current Holocaust studies, and adds personal flair to the many trials of the Holocaust. She writes of constant yelling, countless demands from Ukrainians and Nazi soldiers, and consistent insensitivity to the prisoners held in the camp.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, Sobibór is known for its surprising end: as news of the killing center's liquidation spread around the camp, the six hundred remaining survivors retaliated, and some managed to escape. As was mentioned before, Saartje and her (later) husband Chaim were part of that group. The Jewish Virtual Library explains more in depth the revolt of the Jews against Sobibór guards. A man named Leon Feldhendler, with the help of a Jewish officer, managed to arrange an uprising in which numerous guards died. During this chaos, some survivors managed to escape, and of those numbers, even fewer reached true freedom without dying in the escape process or being chased down a few days later. With no prisoners left, the facility was shut down,

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<sup>4</sup> Saartje Wijnberg, "Holocaust Sources in Context: Diary of Saartje Wijnberg," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, last modified 9 April 1943, <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/diary-of-saartje-wijnberg/collection/holocaust-diaries#>

<sup>5</sup> "Holocaust Encyclopedia: Sobibór," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

<sup>6</sup> Wijnberg, "Diary of Saartje Wijnberg," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

covered up to hide its true identity, and nearly any trace of the site was destroyed.<sup>7</sup> For us today, there is a challenge in being able to identify the truth in this whole story--were Saartje's observations accurate? Is the layout she describes reminiscent of the location? How can we know this to be true? Even though Saartje's journal mentions nothing of escape, knowing the context of this time and her story beyond just her writings allows us to better validate what she is passing on to readers.

One of the difficulties of this source relates to her survival after being in the camp, even though she does not detail that in her journal. What we know, according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's brief description of her story, is that Saartje and her husband Chaim managed to live in hiding from 1943-1944.<sup>8</sup> With this information, we realize that her writing may not be limited to only her time in Sobibór. Although her piece boasts the label "Sobibór, 9 April 1943", there is no reason to doubt that she could have gone back days, months, or even years later and added to the same entry. That is the point of a diary--it is not necessarily intended for anyone's eyes but the writer's, and thus can be changed however the author sees fit. The synopsis of Saartje's writing claims that this particular entry is formed by a few different notes, ranging in dates from the time she lived in Sobibór to post-escape living in hiding in Poland. We also do not know whether these (potentially separate) writings were clumped together because they are all from the same author, or because they were composed within the same entry. We must consider how her writings are affected by this fact. Could she be writing

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<sup>7</sup> Mitchell G. Bard, "Sobibór Extermination Camp: History and Overview," *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed 8 October 2017, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overview-of-sobibor>

<sup>8</sup> "Diary of Saartje Wijnberg," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

first-hand experiences from the camp itself, or is she recounting her experiences from a safer location? Could her memories be blurred by trauma? Is there any reason to suspect that her writing might be censored to protect herself or the reader? Without more information, we cannot make any assumptions.

Personal biases are often difficult to notice, but Saartje's writing does not argue strongly in any particular way when it comes to what she talks about. In fact, the topics she writes about are rather matter-of-fact, considering the anguish she likely would have been facing at the time. Her words do not convey a sense of fear or urgency of the issue; rather, she recounts mere observations of this new world around her. She writes of an old woman being beaten in the street, families being separated and sent to the gas chambers, precious personal items being stolen, and women being stripped of their hair without any deeper consideration for the matter.<sup>9</sup> And all the while, Saartje's outlook on the issues remains blasé. This can only speak to the atrocities that occurred between these years--even in a personal journal, where one likely writes his/her deepest thoughts, there is a lack of emotion, because people are simply immune to and powerless against the barbarity of the Holocaust.

As was mentioned before, when we approach primary sources, especially those surrounding difficult subjects, there comes a moment when we have to determine its credibility. This often is not a quick (or easy) process, and requires work on the reader's part to determine the truth. Saartje comments in her diary that "I cannot describe everything I experienced or heard and I therefore also hope that there will remain some people who come from such a camp who survive."<sup>10</sup> She admits that she cannot fully put into words what she is experiencing, and

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<sup>9</sup> Wijnberg, "Diary of Saartje Wijnberg," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

<sup>10</sup> Wijnberg, "Diary of Saartje Wijnberg," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

therefore hopes that others can help to explain this tragic event. There can be value in bunching similar stories, because we can analyze them side-by-side to see what is common experience (increasing its truth factor), and what is contradicted between primary sources. The sad reality is that during this time period, many people did not survive to offer their works for a greater purpose, and even writings that were found among possessions were destroyed in the denial of the Holocaust. That being said, we must treasure even more the writings, art, and oral stories that have transcended great challenges, and give these emotional issues the respect they deserve by constantly seeking the truth.

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