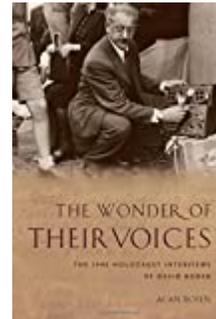




Alan Rosen. *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. xvii + 310 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-539512-9.



Reviewed by Hank Greenspan (University of Michigan)

Published on H-Judaic (September, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Before Trauma and Testimony: Looking Back at David Boder

For many years, invoking the work of David Boder was considered insider knowledge among scholars concerned with Holocaust survivor testimony. Unfortunately, much of what we assumed we knew about Boder and his work was oversimplified or simply wrong. In *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder*, Alan Rosen has set the record straight.

This much remains uncontested: Boder himself was a psychologist born in Latvia who emigrated to the United States in 1926 after a number of years in Mexico. In late summer, 1946, already nearly sixty years old, Boder initiated the work for which he has become known. He spent two months interviewing displaced persons—predominantly people whom we now call “Holocaust survivors”—at a number of European sites, especially in France, Switzerland, and, eventually, Germany. Using an electronic wire audio recorder, Boder gathered over one hundred accounts. Rosen notes that Boder did not use the term *testimony* [italics in original], but rather referred to the DP interviews as narratives, reports, personal histories and documents, stories, and

even tales (p. 12). Aside from a few early folklore projects in which songs from the camps and ghettos were recorded, Boder was the first to electronically preserve survivors’ voices. He thus became known as the forefather of the many recorded testimony projects that were to come, the largest not founded until the 1980s and 90s.

Much of Rosen’s excellent study is dedicated to showing how much more complex, and interesting, the actual story is. He notes, for example, that there were several projects committed to gathering survivors’ accounts in the first years after liberation. Chief among these were the historical commissions established across Europe, and founded as early as 1944. Organized primarily by survivors themselves—some of whom were involved in documentary efforts during the destruction (most famously, Rachel Auerbach, who worked with Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto)—the commissions generated more than ten thousand survivor accounts in various forms by 1947, a number dwarfing Boder’s hundred-plus.

As Rosen notes, the primary differences between Boder's work and that of the historical commissions relate to recording medium, intended audience, and purpose. The commissions primarily relied on responses to questions which were written either by the interviewee or dictated to an interviewer—a documentary technique that has a long history in Jewish historiography. Boder's use of electronic recording was, again, a key part of what set his project apart. (Although electronic recording was already being used in American psychology more generally, as Rosen describes.)

Second, the historical commissions' work was intended primarily for European audiences—including survivors themselves and, at least in hope, all of those who could be affected by detailed documentation of the destruction grounded in materials gathered from surviving victims. This included the collection of a wide range of artifacts as well as interviews, materials intended to serve ethnography as well as history, and—depending on the particular commission—documentation for purposes that were memorial, juridical (e.g., war crimes trials), what we now call public history (there were a few short-lived "museums" of the catastrophe in postwar Europe), as well as professional historiography.

As a psychologist, Boder had different goals. Above all, he was interested in the form as much as the content of retelling. "It was not only what they said but how they said it that could best attest to the privations they had recently suffered," Rosen summarizes (p. 203). Early on, Boder used the TAT—a projective psychological test similar to the famous Rorschach—in order to investigate the role of personality, as well as language, as mediating recounting. Of particular interest from contemporary perspectives, Boder initially did not use the term "trauma" to describe what victims endured, but rather "deculturation"—a reversal of the "acculturation" theories prevalent in the social science of his day. By the late 1940s, Boder did develop what he called a "traumatic index," which he applied both to his interviews with DPs as well as to survivors of natural disaster (primarily, a flood in Kansas). But "trauma" as Boder used it was a purely descriptive listing of outward events—objective losses and privations. Like "testimony," then, "trauma" as it is employed today was not part of Boder's project.

While Boder as psychologist remained dedicated to analysis of "how they said it" in his scholarly work, he became an advocate as well. He was exquisitely aware that the DPs he was getting to know, and especially the young people to whom he was drawn, did not resemble the denigrating images of survivors prevalent in America

(including Jewish America) of the time. In *I Did Not Interview the Dead*, Boder's 1949 book that carried pushback in its title, Boder wrote in the introduction that the DPs "are not riffraff, not the scum of the earth, not the poor devils who suffer because they don't know their rights, not idlers who declaim that the world owes them a living. They are uprooted people" (quoted, p. 137). Here, too, Rosen's study reminds us that not only orienting concepts ("testimony," "trauma," etc.), but also the substance of response to Holocaust survivors reflects particular historical contexts. And, for Boder, an American audience was constantly in mind. The bulk of his interviews opened with some version of the invitation: "We know very little in America about the things that happened to you in concentration camps. If you want to help us out by contributing information about the fate of the displaced persons, tell your own story" (p. 62).

All of this is immensely informing. But perhaps the most illuminating part of *Wonder* is Rosen's detailed description of Boder's approach as it changed in response to different interviewees and circumstances. Rosen summarizes that, in retrospect, Boder gave "the impression, wittingly or not, that neither his approach nor his conceptions changed during the expedition. But this was not the case" (p. 63). Indeed, Boder's own notes "reveal an acute sense of evolution," including references to "experimental interviews" that "served as stepping stones in the development of procedures" (p. 63). "[F]lexibility was clearly one of Boder's convictions" (p. 104). Boder also evinced conviction regarding publication. He self-published his five-volume *Topical Autobiographies of Displaced Persons* (1957), which included eighty verbatim interview transcripts that Boder translated into English, along with his interpretive commentary. Relative to the more accessible *I Did Not Interview the Dead*, *Topical Autobiographies* was, in Rosen's phrase, a kind of "counter-book," painstakingly created for those whose interest in such accounts was as serious as Boder's own.

For those who still have a serious interest in what we now call "Holocaust survivor testimony"—and the conventions that have come to surround its collection and interpretation—one inescapable lesson of Rosen's excellent book is that *there is no way it had to be*. And there is still no way it has to be: a lesson as important today—as we approach survivors of other hells (e.g., Rwanda or Cambodia)—as it was important during two months in late summer, 1946. The relative significance of the how as well as the what of retelling, insuring flexibility of approach in both gathering and publishing accounts, and the utility of trauma and even testimony itself as organizing constructs all remain live questions.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Hank Greenspan. Review of Rosen, Alan, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32512>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.