

*Personal Narratives in the Context of Genocide
and War*

In 1975, the literary scholar Roland Barthes wrote:

There are countless forms of narrative in the world . . . in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative. (p. 237)

These understandings are the foundation of this chapter, indeed of this book.

This chapter presents an overview of psychosocial literature on personal narratives, in general, and in connection to genocide and war, in particular. We begin with *master narratives*, emphasizing their long-term impacts on personal narratives of genocide and war. We then look at the main characteristics and uses of personal narratives in psychosocial research. From there, we briefly discuss archives of personal narratives of survivors and their use in truth commissions, followed by usages of personal narratives in research of genocide and war, mainly – though not only – of the Holocaust and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

An Overview of Master Narratives

On the most basic level, a *master narrative* can be understood as “normative discourse” (Bamberg, 2004, p. 331) since it is “a story through and in which a collective recognizes and understands itself” (Krondorfer, 2020, p. 116). Master narratives are comprehensive, authoritative, dominant culturally shared stories that provide unambiguous representations of a given community’s or society’s history (Humblebæk, 2018).

Such narratives go by many names (Ilic, 2014). Bruner (1991) termed them *canonical scripts* – the unmarked scripts of everyday life, while Frosh (2002) used the similar term *canonical narratives* to denote broad stories

about how lives may be lived that justify certain behaviors. Georgakopoulou (2004) wrote about *shared narratives*, which are familiar or known *stories*. Van Dijk (1993) conceptualized *argumentative narratives*, which collect evidence to support generalizations about one's or another's society. Fleisher Feldman (2001) discussed the *group defining story*, which is conditioned by the group identity, similar to Hammack's (2010) term of *dominant scripts*. Ilic (2014, p. 48) argued that all of these types are a kind of *collective narrative*: "a collective experience which is evaluated, implicitly or explicitly, as being principally important for the community."

From the above, it is clear that master narratives guide people's thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors (Hammack, 2009): as such, they are never value-neutral (Syed & McLean, 2021a). Master narratives are potent because they are reinforced in a myriad of sociocultural products and ways: in the family, the schools, the media, and in the arts. As a result, master narratives – the term that we adopt here – strongly influence a community's and society's self-image for generations (Humlebæk, 2018; Syed & McLean, 2021a).

Jarausch (2002, p. 142) outlined five essential characteristics of master narratives. They offer: (1) the general pattern of historical development; (2) a basic pattern, characterized by progressive development that reflects the "true" nature of the nation and its "historical determination"; (3) dramatic representations, in which historical figures appear on a regular basis; (4) an ideological message; and (5) a form of a people's collective identity by tying the national identity to the historical ideals it represents.

While master narratives provide a representation of the collective past, the sense-making and identification that such narratives further is focused on the present (Humlebæk, 2018), since they "support the driving political agendas of the time" (Tint, 2010, p. 244). Moreover, Syed and McLean (2021a, p. 2) noted that master narratives influence individuals' stories of their experiences and support ongoing privileges of the ruling class, since personal experiences intertwine with the structural systems that uphold these privileges. In other words, master narratives are part of the fabric of people's everyday lives.

Master narratives do not only influence their own societies but also affect other societies and populations, especially when embroiled in a cross-border and/or internal conflict. People from the dominant group usually support and believe their society's master narrative, while people from minority/enemy groups tend to believe *alternative narratives* (Syed & McLean, 2021b) or *competing* or *divergent narratives* (Humlebæk, 2018; Krondorfer, 2020). Master narratives, therefore, do not universally

monopolize interpretation of the past, with their reign contingent upon their social dominance (Humblebæk, 2018).

The sociologist and conflict resolution theoretician Solon Simmons (2020, p. 24) conceptualized Root Narrative Theory, which relates to this issue:

Root Narrative Theory assumes we see political events through the lenses of primitive story structures, the root narratives . . . parties to conflict employ these narratives in ways that they often fail to understand . . . they provide the moral grammar for any given account of conflict, anchoring assumptions about the organizational means in play, the kinds of actors who matter, the historical exemplars for similar events, the ultimate goals actors bring to their actions, and even evaluations of rival descriptions likely to be offered of what actually happened. The moral grammars provide us with the conditions for the possibility of establishing the meaningfulness of our political accounts. Without them, we speak nonsense.

Simmons further argued that by understanding the root narrative profiles of parties embroiled in a conflict, we become better prepared to interact with them. In doing so, we reduce radical disagreements. This point is important for us to make here since, in this book, we focus on understanding *conflict narratives* that connect to intergroup conflict and the ways in which such narratives can either help advance or obstruct peacebuilding. Another point that needs to be stressed is that conflict narratives represent the ways in which people create context for communication, as well as the ways in which contextual factors shape communication between enemies (Kellet & Dalton, 2001) – a point we explore in Chapter 4.

Given that one major focus of this book is narratives connected to the Israeli–Palestinian/Jewish–Arab violent conflict, we will end this subsection with Yadgar’s (2003, p. 58) notions of a *national narrative*, in this context:

the national narrative is the story that a (national) collective tells about itself. It tells the individuals constituting the nation . . . who they are, what comprises their past . . . the structure of their characteristics as a collective, and where they are heading; that is, how they should act in the political realm. This story is constructed from a set of secondary narratives, myths, symbols, metaphors and images . . . The complexity of national identity . . . calls for an ambiguous if not ambivalent presentation of certain aspects within the narrative . . . reflecting the complexity of individual and collective identity . . . [the national narrative] address[es] six themes: the values of

the nation, the interaction between the national collective and other nations, the nation's past, the collective's limits, expressed in terms of belonging and otherness, the nation's attitude towards traditional religion (namely, in this case, Judaism), and the nation's heroes and villains.

Personal Narratives in Psychosocial Research

Donald Polkinghorne (1988, p. 160) wrote that people are "immersed in narrative," telling themselves stories in a "virtually uninterrupted monologue." Numerous scholars have focused on personal narratives of crises and/or landmark events (e.g., *turning points* in McAdams and Bowman's terms, 2001) in people's lives. People perceive their personal stories as "a version of reality" (Bruner, 1991, p. 5), selecting events and interactions to share that have personal and social significance and relevance (Bruner, 2004).

Sandelowski (1991) and Atkinson (1990) further tied personal narratives to master narratives. In Sandelowski's words (1991, p. 162), narrators are "socially positioned in a given biographical moment and under the influence of prevailing cultural conventions." Atkinson (1990) connected the personal to the more universal, perceiving personal narratives as opportunities for people to understand their own development and for gaining insights into how individual stories connect to wider, collective understandings. He described such creation as *personal mythmaking* or *monomyths* (pp. 200–201).

Among other things, Sarbin's (1990) and Brockmeier's (2005, 2015) work highlighted that narratives are *action* and *emotional work* as well. For example, Sarbin (1990, pp. 50, 53) asserted that "the actions of people in daily life are guided by narrative plots . . . human actors engage in conduct . . . to satisfy some purpose." Later on, Brockmeier (2005) related to narratives as phenomena that tie together emotions, perspective-taking, meaning, and actions (pp. 291–292):

First, narrative brings a perspective to our experience, knowledge, thought, and much of our emotional life, a perspective that organizes how we face the world in which we live and how we position ourselves and others in this world. Second, it connects . . . several distinct elements to each other as to constitute a whole; that is, it creates a synthesis of meaning . . . Coherence, in this view, emerges as the connective force of a meaning structure . . . And third, narrative is a way to do things . . . it is, a mode of action and performance inextricably entangled with the cultural grammar of

a community of action and interpretation . . . narrative is a perspective, a synthesis, and a form of life.

While narrative scholars have elicited and analyzed personal narratives in different ways, in different contexts, and for different purposes, they agree on at least two points. The first one is that personal narratives are based on memory: Therefore, they are not objective recollections of facts, but rather understandings of events and relationships that people experienced (Josselson, 2009). This is especially important to remember when dealing with personal narratives connected to genocide and intractable conflict. In other words, when listening to people's life experiences, we should not relate to them as objective accounts of what happened, but rather as reflecting the *meaning* that the events had for the individual that influenced what they *chose* to share (Hiller & Chaitin, 2014). As the influential narrative psychologist Ruthellen Josselson (2009) wrote, autobiographical memory is a process of reconstruction. While the autobiographer can talk about the same event at different times, this vantage point from which they interpret these events transforms the meaning of the narrated event. As a result, the present constructs the past, creating a kind of dialogue between the remembered and the remembering self.

Connected to this point of consensus is the understanding that narratives reflect the "truth" as the autobiographer understands it and/or wishes to convey. However, this cannot ensure that what the person is narrating is necessarily truthful. At times, it may contain recollections of events that did not actually happen – or at least in the way that events and relationships are related in the person's story. This issue – of veracity and falsehood in narratives (Matthews & Kennett, 2012) – can, of course, influence people's willingness to enter into peacebuilding or obstruct such endeavors.

The second point of consensus is that narratives touch the very heart of identity, especially in contexts connected to social trauma (discussed in Chapter 2). Narratives, thus, are reflexive endeavors: they help us make sense of our own lives and define who we are (Flory & Iglesias, 2010; Hawkins & Saleem, 2012; McAdams, 1993; Svašek & Domecka, 2013). In addition, as we engage in this reflexivity, we create "truths" from these narrative discourses (Sarbin, 1998, p. 147) that we wish others to adopt as well (Riessman, 1991).

What are the characteristics of narratives? Narratives embrace complexity and invite discussion (Nicholson, 2016). When people share their narratives, they talk about experiences that occurred over time. The personal story includes characters, descriptions, emotions, climax,

denouement, explanations of why things occurred as they did, and, often, the moral of the tale. All of these offer insights into people's understandings of their personal and social lives, values, and beliefs (e.g., Brockmeier, 2015; Gilligan, 2015; Svašek & Domecka, 2013).

The ways in which people narrate their relations with others is especially important when these relationships are conflictual (Winslade & Monk, 2001). In such cases, narratives often become solidified, as they are "rehearsed and elaborated over and over again" (Winslade & Monk, 2001, p. 3). However, it would be a mistake to view conflict narratives as inherently solidified, unambiguous, or coherent. As some narrative scholars have shown – such as Langer (1991) in his analyses of Holocaust survivors' narratives and Uehara and colleagues' research (2001) of people who survived the Killing Fields in Cambodia in the 1970s – personal narratives of highly traumatic experiences are often fragmented and chaotic.

As a final point in connection to conflict narratives, Hammack (2011, p. 313) argued that personal narratives are "integrative prisms" through which we interpret social-political complexity. As he noted, a personal narrative "possesses implications for a particular configuration of social categories . . . and is a consistent encounter with the world of stories about the social categories we inhabit." Furthermore, as Gilligan and colleagues remind us (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Taylor et al., 1995), listening to people from different social categories (in their case, marginalized girls and women) also "tune[s] our ear to the multiplicity of voices that speak within and around us, including voices that speak at the margins and those which . . . tend to be held in silence" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 76).

With these notions in mind, we now turn to a discussion of personal narratives found in archives and used for social-political purposes.

Personal Narratives in Survivor Testimonies' Archives, Courts of Law, and in Truth Commissions

Personal Narratives in Archives

In his description of archives that house documentation of social-political atrocities, like the Holocaust, Baum (2017, pp. 679, 681) stated:

archives take the form of libraries, museums, monuments, shrines and churches. They are also morgues which, as Derrida (1992) notes, shelter as they conceal. Archives claim to be repositories for memory, and they are: memories politicized by their owners and re-crafted by the architect to demonstrate the most coherent narrative possible – or desirable. They are

curated, but rarely curative. The physical construction houses the sayable and the seen, testimony recorded in some form. The archive is intended to be the safekeeper of an original record and hold an “authentic” document, but this is inherently disputable terminology, as the boundaries of the original, authentic, received and therefore “known” are invented and optimistic categories . . . Holocaust museums strive to make the Shoah “real” – to recreate a present-day, mundane experience of the Shoah so that contemporary viewers, and perhaps especially young people, can *feel* it.¹

Audio, video, and written narratives of genocide and war are housed in numerous governmental, university, library, community, and internet archives. For example, for over half a century, Amnesty International (2022) has gathered and stored testimonies from people around the globe who have survived genocidal attempts and violent war. The organization publishes parts of these testimonies on their website, which is available in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic, in order to get victims’ voices out to a worldwide public and, in doing so, increase the human rights of people who have been wronged.

Since one of our foci is on narratives in connection to the Holocaust, it is worthwhile noting some of the important archives of Holocaust testimonies. Major institutions (alphabetically ordered) include the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University, which was established in 1981 and houses over 4,400 testimonies (Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, 2020). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s oral history archive includes interviews that the museum has conducted, as well as testimonies that it collected from a variety of sources of different populations who were persecuted by the Nazi regime and their collaborators (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum – Oral History, n.d.). The USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (n.d.) has over 55,500 video testimonies, undertaken in forty-four languages in over sixty-five countries. Founded over fifty years ago, the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem (Yad Vashem, 2022) houses the largest collection of Holocaust documents in the world, with over 131,000 survivor testimonies. Finally, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, established in 1945, includes Holocaust diaries and survivors’ testimonies written in ghettos and concentration camps during the war (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2022). The public is able to access documents from all of these archives either in person, on site, or via the Internet.

¹ Throughout this book, emphasis in quotes is always in the original.

Personal Narratives in Courts of Law and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

Personal narratives – from victims and perpetrators – have been used as evidence in courts of law and in truth commissions in post-conflict countries aiming to right (at least, some of) the wrongs of the past. These legally binding forums work to give victims of gross human rights' violations voice and to hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes, which were sanctioned and carried out by governmental bodies and their militaries, in order to work toward reconciliation and repair. While there is not one official site that lists all the truth commissions that have been held, it is estimated that there have been between thirty-five and forty-five such commissions in different countries that have documented the personal testimonies of hundreds of thousands of people (Hayner, 2008).²

Personal testimonies of Holocaust survivors have also been used since the mid-1940s in courts of law. For example, Holocaust survivors gave testimonies concerning their horrific wartime experiences at the Nuremberg trials of twenty-one top-ranking Nazis in 1946 and later, in 1961, at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

A few well-known truth commissions include the 1983 commission in Argentina (e.g., May, 2013; Vázquez Guevara, 2022); the 1990 commission in Chile (Ensalaco, 1994; Ferrara, 2015); the 1994 commission in Guatemala (The Truth Commission, 2022); the 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa (e.g., Andrews, 1999, 2019; Fuchs et al., 2013; Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003; Rothberg, 2009; Young, 2004); the 1992 East Germany commission (e.g., Andrews, 2003; McAdams, 2001); and the 2003 commission in Sierra Leone (Kelsall, 2005; Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, n.d.).

While there is no doubt that truth commissions provide one very important platform for victims to share their stories – and require perpetrators to confess their crimes – there is a lack of agreement regarding their ultimate value to social justice, peacebuilding, and human rights. For example, there is disagreement concerning whether victims' personal experiences should be publicized and if such commissions do indeed lead to reconciliation and provide some kind of closure for the victims (Urquidí Herrera, 2019), since the veracity of the perpetrators' "confessions" has been questioned (Kelsall, 2005).

² See, for example, Truth Commission Digital Collection, United States Institute of Peace (March 16, 2011): www.usip.org/publications/2011/03/truth-commission-digital-collection.

Personal Narratives in the Contexts of Genocide and War

In their study on personal narratives in contexts of war, Hammack and Pilecki (2012) coined the term *narrative engagement* to describe the process in which “members of a society engage with collective stories of what it means to inhabit a particular political entity” (p. 77). As we have noted, since people construct personal narratives that connect their own experiences to their group’s history, identity, and ideology, personal story-making, especially in contexts of massive social trauma, is not solely an individual act: it is also a social-political act.

Some examples of narrative research of people who experienced genocidal attempts and/or have lived through intractable conflicts include the following.³ Berents (2019) analyzed memoirs of child survivors of different wars, emphasizing their agency in navigating their wartime experiences. Laycock (2016) undertook analyses of interviews with children and families of survivors of the Armenian genocide that (re)settled in the Soviet Union of Armenia in 1945. These narratives tended to focus on the genocide that took place during World War I, as well as the ongoing migration of their people due to their traumatic past. Hosseini (2019) studied personal narratives of Êzîdî women who survived physical and sexual violence perpetrated against them and their community by ISIS. Halilovich (2016) explored personal narratives connected to the genocide in Bosnia in the early 1990s, Weine (1999) looked at trauma and forgiveness among Bosnian refugees and narratives that exacerbated ethnic hatred and genocide among Serbian nationalists, and Simic (2008) wrote about her personal experiences of visiting Srebrenica.⁴ Another important piece of narrative research was undertaken with former Korean comfort women (Howard, 1996) who were forced into prostitution by the Japanese army during the 1930s.

In the African context, examples of narrative research include studies undertaken by Gilbert (2018), High (2013), Petersen-Coleman and Swaroop (2011), Sekalala (2016), and Williamson Sinalo and colleagues (2021) of Tutsis, who survived the 1994 genocide, for memorialization, reconciliation, and psychological treatment purposes. Two rare studies of perpetrators were undertaken in Rwanda and South Africa. Bigabo and

³ The literature overwhelmingly focuses on victims’ accounts. However, a few studies have been undertaken with perpetrators of the genocides and violent wars.

⁴ In 1995, over 7,000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men were murdered by Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica, a town in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, more than 20,000 civilians were ethnically cleansed from the area. This massacre was the worst episode of mass murder within Europe after World War II (R. Smith, 2022).

Jansen (2020) interviewed eight convicted genocide perpetrators in Rwanda, learning that some perpetrators justified their violence while simultaneously emphasizing their desire to be part of the country's reconciliation process. The book published by South African Gobodo-Madikizela (2003), *A Human Being Died that Night*, recounts the author's meetings with state-sanctioned mass murderer Eugene de Kock,⁵ who headed the [apartheid in South Africa](#). In her book, the author shared her growing empathy, as she got to know de Kock, and other apartheid perpetrators who committed crimes against humanity. Ehrenreich (1998) wrote about the horrific experiences of children in Uganda who were abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army and forced to become soldiers in the late 1980s. In the same vein, Denov and Blanchet-Cohen (2016) studied the impact of the civil war in Angola on a child survivor of the war. As a final example, Nyarko and Punamäki (2017) undertook a study of Liberian women who survived the war in their country and became refugees in Ghana.

It is incredibly sad that there have been so many occurrences of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and violent war, and that these human-made tragedies have killed and severely scarred so many innocent people. The above (extremely short) list of narrative studies – as well as the many research projects not cited here – have elicited and analyzed victims' narratives so that some of their traumatic experiences and voices can be sounded, and hopefully addressed.

Personal Narratives in the Context of Holocaust Experiences and Consequences

One major area of narrative research of genocide centers on the Holocaust and its intergenerational impacts. Narrative studies began with exploring survivors' experiences and the effects of this genocide on their lives, and quickly began including their children. Since the 1990s, research has included their grandchildren as well. Here, we briefly present some of this influential work in the psychosocial realm.

In 1946, David Boder (a Jewish psychologist, originally from Latvia) arrived in Paris from the United States. He spent two months – in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany – audio-recording interviews with 130 displaced persons. These interviews, considered to be the earliest audio

⁵ De Kock was the commanding officer of Cto, a counterinsurgency unit of the police that kidnapped, tortured, and murdered anti-apartheid activists during the 1980s and early 1990s. After his confessions at the TRC, he was sentenced to 212 years in prison (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003). In January 2015, Justice Minister Michael Masutha granted De Kock parole, in order to help the country heal (Death squad leader Eugene De Kock granted parole, *The Guardian*, January 30, 2015).

recordings of Holocaust survivors, lasted from twenty minutes to several hours (Boder, 1949; Katz, 2019; Rosen, 2010).⁶ Another early documenter of Holocaust narratives was Donald Niewyk, who also interviewed survivors in displaced persons camps in 1946. However, his material was not published until 1998 (Baum, 2017).

In addition to narrative research of survivors, there is also copious literature written by the survivors themselves, which recounts experiences before the persecution, during the Shoah, and often about life afterwards. A very short list of major (haunting) works include the memoirs by Primo Levi (*Survival in Auschwitz*, 1958/1996); Charlotte Delbo (*Auschwitz and After*, 1995); Elie Wiesel (*Night*, 1958/2006); Viktor Frankl (*Man's Search for Meaning*, 1959/2021); Saul Friedlander (*When Memory Comes*, 1979); and Yehiel De Nur (who wrote fifteen novels – under the pseudonym Ka Tsetnik 135633⁷ – based on his experiences in Auschwitz). While each personal narrative of this genocide is unique, they all share one theme – the difficulty survivors have believing that they experienced what they experienced. As Baum (2017, p. 687) – a son of two survivors – noted:

How many times have we read *memoires* of the Shoah in which the narrator insists upon the unbelievable nature of the events? . . . References to the surreal and unreal . . . placing death camps far beyond the known galaxy – iterates the difficulty of the victim to believe what is happening, and the labour of the survivor to integrate the horrors.

It is also interesting to note that many narrative researchers of the Holocaust either survived the genocide themselves or are survivors' children (e.g., Nathan Durst (2003) – a survivor from Holland; Natan Kellermann (2009, 2022) – a son of Holocaust survivors, whose mother was interned in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen; and Robert Krell (2021), a child survivor, who was cared for by a Dutch family – to mention just a few).

In the realm of psychology, psychiatry, and social work, narrative studies include work undertaken by the clinical psychologist, victimologist, and trauma expert Yael Danieli, who began this research in the 1980s (e.g., Danieli, 1980, 1982, 1988, 1998) and expanded her work to include other populations threatened by genocide (e.g., Danieli, 2020; Danieli et al., 2016). Dina Wardi (1990), a social worker, studied intergenerational psychological impacts of the Shoah on the second generation in group

⁶ These interviews can be accessed at *Voices of the Holocaust* – <https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/deutschY>.

⁷ From the Yiddish – a death/concentration camp prisoner; 135633 was his number in Auschwitz.

work, in which participants shared their personal experiences. The late psychiatrist and child survivor Dori Laub (1992a, 1992b) focused on the high importance of witnesses for survivor testimonies. Henry (Hank) Greenspan, alone and with colleagues (e.g., Greenspan, 1998; Rubin & Greenspan, 2006), has undertaken narrative work with Holocaust survivors for over fifty years, reinterviewing people over time in order to understand the long-term significance of the Shoah for survivors and psychologists. In Israel, Adi Duchin and Hadas Wiseman (2019) have collected narratives of child survivors.

Scholars from other disciplines have also undertaken narrative research on this topic. For example, two second-generation anthropologists include Carol Kidron (2003, 2009), who studied intergenerational impacts of the Shoah on the identity of the second generation, and Barbara Rylko-Bauer (2005), who interviewed her mother – a Catholic Pole – who was interned in death camps. The literary scholar Lawrence Langer (1991) wrote about the tortured memories of survivors (detailed further in Chapter 3). Finally, Sara Roy (2007), a political economist, wrote about how growing up with survivor parents led her to engage in social justice work, especially in the Israeli–Palestinian context.

Over the years, narrative research on the Holocaust also began to include the third generation – the grandchildren of the victims. In 1995, Dan Bar-On, a clinical and social psychologist, published *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust* – the first book of its kind that presented and analyzed narrative interviews conducted with Jewish-Israeli families. Bar-On found that the grandchildren often served as a bridge between their parents and their grandparents, since the grandchildren openly asked their grandparents what happened to them during the war, and then shared this knowledge with their parents, many of whom had never learned the details of their parents' pasts.

In my (Julia's) narrative study of three generations in families of Holocaust survivors (e.g., Chaitin, 2000, 2002, 2003), I found that while the second generation often overgeneralized the significance of the Shoah in their lives, the third generation was often at odds concerning the relevance that the Shoah had for them. (Chapter 3 delves deeply into Bar-On's and my conceptualizations concerning coping with this genocide in different generations.)

Gabriele Rosenthal (2010) – a German sociologist – also published a narrative book on three-generational families connected to the Holocaust. In addition to examining Jewish-Israeli survivor families, she interviewed people from families of Nazi perpetrators and accomplices,

using a life-story approach. Rosenthal aimed to learn how the perpetrators', bystanders', and victims' pasts influenced their descendants and their family dynamics, finding that while the survivors and their descendants emphasized Holocaust experiences, the perpetrators'/helpers' descendants focused on the extent to which their grandparents were implicated in Nazi crimes. Furthermore, while people from survivor families often tended to emphasize the theme of death, interviewees from Israel and Germany, whose lives were uprooted, discussed the impact of emigration on their lives in their new societies.

In two other studies that focused on non-Jewish Germans – one undertaken by Fuchs (a third-generation German) and colleagues (2013, pp. 136–137) and one carried out by Bar-On (1989) with children of Nazis – the researchers learned that since, after the war, German collective confrontation with war crimes had induced immense feelings of guilt and shame, German society tried to “erase” the Nazi years. By being silent, the war generation was not only able to dissociate from their inaction/actions between 1933 and 1945, but also “set the stage” for the legacies of silence that continued for generations.

*Personal Narratives in the Context of Jewish–Arab Relations and the
Palestinian–Israeli Conflict*

A second major focus of this book is narrative work connected to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Before looking at some of this literature, however, it is important to keep in mind that this conflict is complex, not only because of the multi-issue, multilayered, and multigenerational conflict that exists between Israelis and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories (the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem), but also because of the internal Jewish–Arab relations (between citizens of the state) that connect to this external conflict, albeit with its own unique characteristics. First, a few words about this internal conflict.

Within Israel, there are often strong tensions between the dominant Jewish sector and the minority Arab sector, due to Israel's official definition of the country as a Jewish and democratic state.⁸ This definition – and resulting governmental policies and practices – is problematic for the Arab minority (and also for some left-wing Jewish-Israelis), who desire to live in a state for all its citizens. Thus, the Arab population aspires to be citizens of

⁸ See Israel's Declaration of Independence on the Knesset website – <https://m.knesset.gov.il/en/about/pages/declaration.aspx>.

a country that emphasizes the country's democratic nature over its Jewish nature. However, the prevailing notion in Israel is one that favors the Jewish nature of the state – stressing that Israel is, first and foremost, the homeland of the Jews. As a result, Jewish citizens tend to be prioritized over non-Jewish citizens.

In this book, we present and analyze personal narratives from both the internal and external conflicts. Here, we begin with narrative literature that focuses on the (external) Israeli–Palestinian conflict, followed by literature connected to personal narratives of Arab citizens. Then we explore literature on Jewish citizens.

Let us first note, however, that when asked to narrate their lives in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, people from the conflicting sides tend to do so in a way that connects to the wider social-political context, thus cementing their place and identity as “Israelis” or “Palestinians” (Chaitin et al., 2009). As Adwan and Bar-On (2006) noted, since Israelis and Palestinians hold oppositional master narratives concerning their own and their enemy's histories and image, it is not surprising to find that Jewish-Israelis tend to talk about themselves as victims due to the Holocaust and/or the ongoing wars and terror attacks, while Palestinians talk about themselves as victims due to their traumatic personal and family experiences connected to the *Nakba* and/or their continued occupation and refugee status (Hammack & Toolis, 2015; Nicholson, 2016). Furthermore, as in the case of the Holocaust, Jewish/Arab-Israeli/Palestinian narratives connected to the conflict have been elicited from at least three generations from both sides.

Palestinian Personal Narratives

One major topic of narrative research in this context explores personal experiences of direct victims of the *Nakba*⁹ – the major result of the 1948 war, from the Palestinian perspective. Because of that war, approximately three-quarters of a million of the Palestinians living in what became the State of Israel were expelled/fled from their homes, becoming refugees, and losing their homeland.¹⁰ Nets-Zehngut (2011), who undertook research on

⁹ Catastrophe, in English.

¹⁰ According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), “Palestine refugees are people whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict” (UNRWA, n.d., Palestine Refugees, para. 1). Today, UNRWA has over 5.5 million registered refugees (the original refugees and their patrilineal descendants) (UNRWA in Figures, June 2020). The UN estimated that there were originally approximately 711,000

the Palestinian memories of the exodus by analyzing four oral history projects with 1948 Palestinian refugees (both internal – that is, who remained in Israel, but not in their original homes, and external – who left Israel's borders. In sum, there were 131 interviewees from 38 localities). The researcher found that all the projects described the economic, social, cultural, and historical aspects of the Palestinian locality prior to 1948, as well as the fate of the Palestinians after they left. Moreover, he found that in these projects most of the autobiographers talked more about their fear and the military attacks on their villages and neighborhoods during the exodus than the expulsion itself.

For over thirty years, “Palestine Remembered” (2022) – an online community – has provided statistics, narrative interviews, videos, photos, and maps of Palestinian refugees and locales (towns, villages, and neighborhoods) that were destroyed and rebuilt for/resettled by Jewish citizens, in order to provide details of the dispossession and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. Furthermore, in 2017, the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2017) published on their website excerpts of fifty narratives of Palestinians who were living under occupation.

Over the years, *The Journal of Palestine Studies* has collected a number of personal narratives of Palestinians who directly suffered the *Nakba*. Three examples include the personal stories of Elias Srouji (2004), Um Jabr Wishah (2006), and Gada Karmi (1994), who all experienced displacement, exile, and loss as a result of the war. In her article, Alshaibi (2006) a Palestinian-American researcher and artist, shared her mother's and grandmother's story of escape in 1948 from Jaffa due to the war and their years of uprooting and transitions. Alshaibi's narrative focused on life as a refugee, hardship, and loss. Other studies of the long-term and multi-layered effects the *Nakba* has had in victims' families include interviews with three mothers from the *Nakba* generation and three of their daughters (Gorkin & Othman, 1996). In another study, Nashef (2021) explored the silencing of Palestinian female voices who suffered in the *Nakba*. Her essay analyzed two historical novels, grounded in events from the 1948 war that depicted incidents of rape in Palestinian towns captured by Israeli forces.

In addition to narratives about the *Nakba*, there are also numerous personal testimonies about oppressive life under occupation, including the *intifadas*, various wars and military operations, as well as personal

Palestinian refugees (General Progress Report and Supplementary Report of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine, 1951).

experiences of Palestinian resistance and solidarity (e.g., Amiry, 2004; Bucaille, 2004; Dunsky, 2021; Gordon et al., 2003; Lynd et al., 1994; Malek & Hoke, 2014; Nusseibeh, 2009; Shehadeh, 2007; Spielberg et al., 2016). Two moving books written by two men from the Gaza Strip present personal stories of men who lost loved ones in the bloody conflict between Israel and the Hamas. Izzeldin Abuelaish's (2010) book, *I Shall Not Hate*, focuses on how the loss of three of his daughters, when they were killed in the First Gaza War, cemented his ongoing commitment toward achieving peace between Israelis and Palestinians. In a second book, Yousef Bashir (2021) wrote about growing up in the Gaza Strip and the traumatic experiences that he experienced as a young teenager during the Second Intifada.

Arab citizens of Israel have also had their narratives documented and analyzed.¹¹ Examples of studies that have explored these personal stories include research undertaken by Armbruster and Emery (2004), *Tears from the Holyland*, and by Kassem (2011) and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2016) – Palestinian citizens of Israel – who wrote about Palestinian women's experiences from the 1948 war, examining the ways in which gender, nationalism, citizenship, and being a refugee intersect in the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Another scholar, Adel Manna (2017), presented narratives of Palestinians who remained in northern Israel after the 1948 war. Rabinowitz (a Jewish-Israeli anthropologist) and Abu-Baker (a Palestinian-Israeli family therapist) wrote a book, hauntingly entitled *Coffins on Our Shoulders* (2005), in which they interweaved their own personal and family histories with a social-political-cultural analysis of the tense, and often volatile, relations between Jewish and Arab citizens of the country.

Narrative research of young and older adults from Bedouin society includes the work carried out by Nuzha Alhuzail (2013, 2018, 2021).¹² Her feminist work has focused on Bedouin women's experiences, including her own – as a Bedouin professor of social work, during

¹¹ Arab citizens use different names to define their identity – Palestinian citizens of Israel, Palestinians in Israel, Israeli Palestinians, the Palestinians of 1948, Palestinian Arabs, and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. Zoabi (2020, cited in Magadlah & Cnann, 2021) suggested referring to Palestinians with Israeli citizenship as *the left behind*, indicating that they stayed after 1948 and remained loyal to their group identity despite state efforts to erase their significance. Jewish citizens and Israeli media often use the term “Arab Israelis,” a term usually not accepted by the Palestinian citizens.

¹² The Bedouin population are a subgroup of Arab society. The Bedouin were traditionally semi-nomadic peoples. Over decades, many have moved away from this traditional way of life. About one-half of the Bedouin population lives in Bedouin cities and the rest mainly in unrecognized villages in the Negev. See Britannica (2024) for more detail.

times of war – mainly connected to issues of the meaning of home, economic (in)dependence, and family relations. Naomi Weiner-Levy (2011), a social psychologist, undertook a narrative study of Druze women, who fought the patriarchal social framework in order to attend university and become independent,¹³ while having to meet challenges of being an Arab minority in Israel.

Personal Narratives from Jewish-Israelis

Many Jewish-Israelis have written autobiographies that connect to their experiences in the external Israeli–Palestinian and/or the internal Jewish–Arab conflict. A few examples of these can be found in the following. In 1948, Yoram Kaniuk offers a detailed account of his traumatic experiences as a young soldier in the War of Independence. Together with his wife, Eitan Bronstein (Bronstein Aparicio & Marza Bronstein, 2018) wrote about the transformation that he underwent from being a Zionist to an anti-Zionist, dedicating his work to achievement of Palestinian rights. In a short article, Avi Bleich (2017), a professor of psychiatry with expertise in trauma and resilience, shared his personal narrative in connection to these issues. In his writings, Dan Bar-On referred to many of his personal experiences (1995, 2006), which included growing up in Haifa – a mixed city of Arabs and Jews – life as a kibbutz member, and his work for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. In her book, Miriam Yahil-Wax (2021) brought together a collection of letters that she wrote to her husband during the Six Day/June 1967 War while he was still alive, and which she continued to write to him after he was killed in battle, as a way to deal with her trauma. The author described what happened to her as a young widow, her loss and her anger, and her will to live and develop. The art therapists Leora Sotto and Eitan Gilor-Miller (2021) wrote a book that examined the Palestinian–Israeli conflict via Leora’s therapeutic work with a young woman, a Palestinian citizen of Israel. The authors shared parts of their personal histories, interweaving their experiences with the therapy and with analyses of the conflict between Jews and Arabs.

I (Julia) have also engaged in narrative research over the years – alone and with Palestinian and Israeli colleagues – that delves into issues of identity and the meaning of life in connection to living with war. For example, together with the Palestinian psychologist Elia Awwad (Chaitin

¹³ See the Pew Research Center article, “5 facts about Israeli Druze, a unique religious and ethnic group” (Theodorou, 2016). The article provides information about the Druze community – one of the Arab communities in Israel – which comprises approximately two percent of the population.

et al., 2009), we explored how Israelis and Palestinians who immigrated to the United States understand their social identity, finding that they continued to see themselves as “belonging to the conflict.” In a study after the First Gaza War (late 2008/early 2009), together with Rotem Sternberg – who headed a Resilience Center in a region bordering the Gaza Strip – we gathered and analyzed life stories of older adults in order to learn how they lived with the violent hostilities in their region (Chaitin & Sternberg, 2016; Chaitin et al., 2013). We learned that these people tended to see themselves as pioneers safeguarding the country, as opposed to victims of rocket attacks. In our – Julia and Elad’s – recent book (Chaitin et al., 2022), we presented and analyzed life-story interviews with thirty-four residents of communities located near the border with the Gaza Strip. We found that life in this war-torn area can be characterized as “routine emergency,” in which Jewish-Israelis have learned to live with the decades-long violent hostilities in a place they describe as being 98 percent paradise and 2 percent Hell.

Since Israel has been embroiled in wars since its establishment, and the IDF is a major part of Jewish-Israeli life, it is not surprising that soldiers’ war experiences have received much research interest – some of which is highly emotional and controversial. In 1998, Teddy Katz – a Jewish-Israeli graduate student at the University of Haifa – submitted his thesis about the mass murder of non-combatants in the Arab village of Tantura in 1948. He asserted that the massacre was perpetrated by troops from the IDF’s Alexandroni Brigade during early stages of the war, based on research that included 140 hours of audio-taped interviews with 135 witnesses to the event – half Jewish, half Arab. The thesis, which received honors, went unnoticed until *Maariv* – a major Israeli newspaper, published its findings in 2000. The result was that Alexandroni Brigade veterans sued Katz for defamation and his degree was revoked. There have been ongoing arguments about the veracity of what happened. Recently, Alon Schwarz, a filmmaker who believes that a massacre was indeed carried out, made *Tantura*, which has been screened in film festivals in the world.

As a second example of controversy concerning uses of narrative interviews related to soldiers, we will note Breaking the Silence – a highly contentious Jewish-Israeli organization founded in 2004 by former soldiers who served in the Occupied Territories, beginning from the Second Intifada. One of this NGO’s main activities is the collection and publication on their website of personal testimonies of the soldiers, which includes human rights’ violations that they say they witnessed against Palestinian citizens and the traumas that they face connected to their experiences.

Breaking the Silence wants the public to know about these actions, in order to bring about the end of the occupation.¹⁴ To date they have collected approximately 1,000 interviews with men and women soldiers, which appear on their website either as texts or as videos (Breaking the Silence, n.d.).

Work that is not controversial among Jewish-Israelis includes, for example, research undertaken by Gabriela Spector-Mersel (Spector-Mersel, 2008; Spector-Mersel & Gilbar, 2021), who explored life stories of men who had been senior officers during the 1948 war. In her book (2008), the scholar found that men were caught between two poles. On the one hand, they once represented the epitome of masculinity and youth – social characteristics with high status – while, on the other hand, with their aging, they were facing their approaching death – social characteristics perceived as undesirable. In order to deal with this tension, the men adopted strategies to retain their youthful persona while also acknowledging their aging. In the second study, Spector-Mersel and Gilbar (2021) used life stories to understand how younger men, who had combat-related posttraumatic stress and were in therapy, understood masculinity. They found that therapy changed the men's perceptions of masculinity, with them moving from a traditional perception to one that reflected emotional sensitivity and the ability to seek help.

Ayelet Harel-Shalev and Shir Daphna-Tekoa (2019) also undertook narrative interviews with women combatants, and analyzed them using feminist approaches. The authors asserted that by hearing women combatants' stories, which are usually missing from scholarship, we can better understand state violence, combat trauma, and issues of (in)security.

We will end this section by mentioning the narrative work carried out by the psychologist Amia Lieblich, who has written numerous books, each time focusing on different populations in Israeli society. Two of her books, which relate to the external and internal political conflicts, are *Seasons of Captivity* (1994), which explored the experiences of ten Jewish-Israelis who were prisoners of war in Egypt after the Yom Kippur/1973 War, and *In Spite of Everything: The Story of a Bi-national Community* (2014) – which presents the life stories of Jews and Arabs who live together in the only mixed village in Israel, Oasis of Peace. Lieblich presents long excerpts from the interviews, giving the reader deep insight into the meaning that such life-changing experiences have had for her interviewees.

¹⁴ It is important for us to note that most Jewish-Israelis are very opposed to the work of Breaking the Silence, perceiving it as an organization that harms soldiers and the state.

Summary

As this chapter has shown, people around the world who have lived through genocidal attempts and destructive wars want to tell their stories, indeed need to tell their stories, to those who will listen. Personal narratives – which are impacted by their society’s master/alternative narratives – include people’s personal and family experiences, the meaning that life holds for them, sense of identity, values and belief systems, actions, and relations with significant others – those close to them and those who caused them harm. There are, at the very least, hundreds of thousands of documented personal narratives in the world that have been used for research and social-political purposes, with some used for reconciliation work as well.

We now turn to conceptualizations of group/collective identity and relationships with the enemy, in order to provide another important piece of the mosaic that connects the sharing of personal experiences of genocide and/or intractable war to peacebuilding or peace obstruction.