

Versione Italiana

Review of the book: Alter Fajnzylberg, *Cosa ho visto ad Auschwitz*, A cura di Roger Fajnzylberg e Alban Perrin (Turin: Einaudi, 2025).

Alter Fajnzylberg
**Cosa ho visto
ad Auschwitz**

A cura di Roger Fajnzylberg e Alban Perrin



Einaudi

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A recent news story reminds us that in 2025, eighty years after the Holocaust, the number of Jewish survivors is dwindling, and unsurprisingly their numbers are projected to disappear almost completely within the next fifteen years. The urgency underlying this inexorable extinction is that for many of the close to 200,000 survivors who are still alive, their memories and testimony of those terrible years will die with them. Yet for now, those memories remain very much alive, as we are told in the above-mentioned article by Albrecht Weinberg, a 100-year-old survivor from Germany who lost almost his entire family in the Holocaust and survived the concentration and death camps at Auschwitz, Mittelbau-Dora, Bergen-Belsen and three death marches at the end of the war. Weinberg says that “even today the horrendous memories are haunting him. ‘I sleep with it, I wake up with it, I sweat, I have nightmares; that is my present’.”

It was just such an admonition concerning the impending loss of Holocaust survivors’ voices and memories, heard at an event held twenty years earlier, in 2005, with 550 surviving orphaned children from Buchenwald, that led Roger Fajnzyberg to finally look at, and ultimately publish, his father Alter’s memoirs about his time at Auschwitz. The texts had been stored in an unopened shoebox for close to sixty years.

Alter Fajnzyberg was very likely to have been on one of those death marches with Albrecht Weinberg, as he was among the prisoners who left Auschwitz on January 18, 1945, when the evacuation of the camp was ordered. Alter joined the ‘marches of death’ and managed to escape along the way before being definitively liberated by the Red Army on March 25, 1945, three years after his deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau from France. However, his experience of the camps, and his odds of surviving the job he was given, was quite unique, dangerous and awful, even for Auschwitz. Alter Fajnzyberg was a worker in the *Sonderkommando*, the unit of Jewish prisoners in charge of removing the bodies from the gas chambers and cremating them, either in open-air pyres or in the large, notorious ovens. While the workers in this unit were routinely executed themselves, a few dozen somehow managed to survive, Fajnzyberg among them.

He performed this job continuously for almost two years, until the camps were evacuated.

Biografia

Fajnzylber Alter

Urodziłem się w 1911 r.
 Pochodzę z rodziny drobnomieszczyńskiej.
 W 1926 r. wstąpiłem do pracy jako ~~robotnik~~ w
 tym samym czasie zostaje zaangażowany do w. z. w.
 i do frakcji zwirkowej. (komunistycznej)
 W 27 r. zostaje przyjęty do Z.M.K.
 W K.M. spełnia rolę technika miejscowego. W
 29 r. zostaje aresztowany i osadzony na 10 wię.
 Po wyjściu z więzienia jestem w dalszym ciągu
 w kom. miejscowym i technikiem miejscowym, przewodniczącym
 sekcji młodzieży. Obstawiamy 3 kamarki i praca
 pionierska. W 31 r. zostaje na nowo aresztowany
 a to na skutek prowokacji i osadzony na 2 lata
 więzi z porachowaniem praw obywatelskich na
 okres 10 lat. Apelacja wyrok odwołano i nie
 realizujemy aresztu preventywnego. 1-ty wyrok odrzucił
 w Płocku, tymczasem gospodarze komuny
 W 31 r. niedługo na powrót i jestem członkiem
 z-k. odwoławczej i delegat wewnętrzny. W 31 r.
 w zw. z nowym regulaminem więziennym zostaje
 proklamowane we wszystkich więzieniach 3 dniowe
 głodówka. i myśmy głodowali.
 Po głodówce wywieźli mnie do Łyczycy i tam
 przebywałem dłużej 3 dni głodówki i protestacyjnej akcji.
 Byłem w Łyczycy dłużej 3 dni i po 2 i 3 dni jak oni
 i wzięli inne protestacje. 2 razy ramkowały
 mnie do karcu raz 2 dni 2-9 i 15 dni twarde
 łóżko

Handwritten biography by Alter Fajnzylberg

Alter and his wife, another camp survivor, started a new life back in France after the war, and they never discussed their experiences in the camps with their children – ever. They spoke about those experiences all the time, in fact, with relatives and friends, yet they would switch to Polish

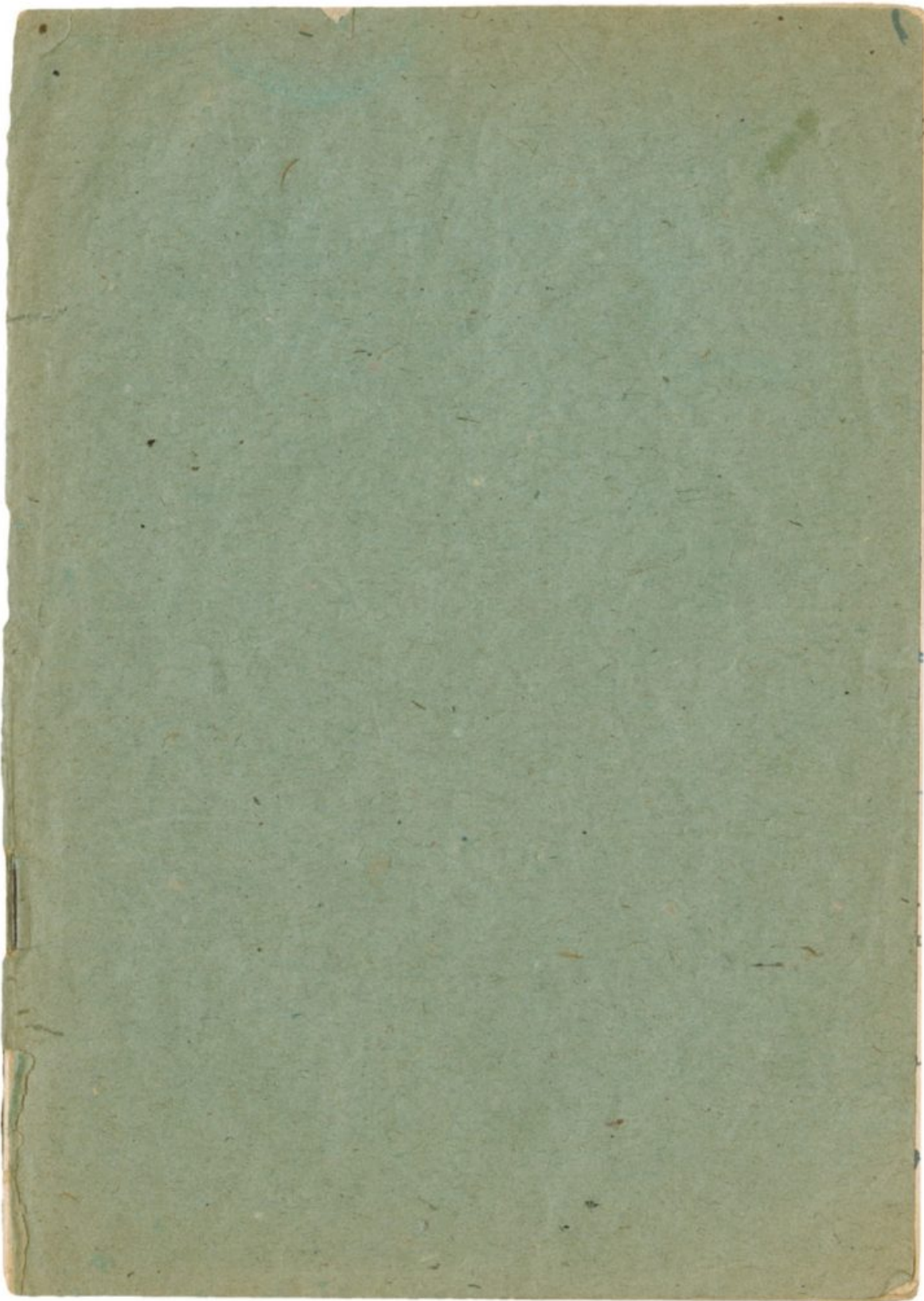
when they did so that their children would not understand, an attitude that Roger tells us was typical for survivors of deportation who had children.

At the time there had not been any assistance service activated: there was no safe space to talk, no office to offer psychological support. On the other hand, there were so many who had suffered the traumas of war... how else could they manage?

Thus, we see that for many, if not most of the survivors of these horrible events, words were an important means for dealing with their memories. They needed to talk them out, share them verbally, relive and revisit them through the power of language, the only available tool worthy of the task, the only vehicle suitable for releasing any of the pain. For some, however, the power of words to encapsulate and organize those memories in writing became an urgent imperative. Alter was one of those who were compelled to commit to writing the experiences they feared sharing with their own children. However, unlike some of his much better-known contemporaries, Alter's writings remained not only unpublished, but unread, consigned to a shoebox that was passed down to his son after his death, but left untouched.

Herein lies one of the intriguing and uniquely poignant aspects of this particular Holocaust account. While Alter's text itself is of course firsthand, in this volume we are introduced to the man, his life and his writings by his son, Roger, who quite openly means to also share his own story as the child of survivors along with that of his father. Neither, we are told, was shared easily. In fact, Roger stresses the hardship of being the child of survivors – of knowing what happened during the war but not knowing what had happened to his own parents – and the visceral fear of learning the truth.

How difficult it is to be the son of deportees! How hard it is to be the son of a deportee assigned to the *Sonderkommandos*! How complicated it is to be the son of survivors who no longer had any hope for themselves, but all for their descendants so that life could revive. This responsibility has obsessed me for my entire existence and obsesses me still today.



The first and main notebook

Yet, in spite of this obsession, Roger found himself unable to open the box, filled with his father's

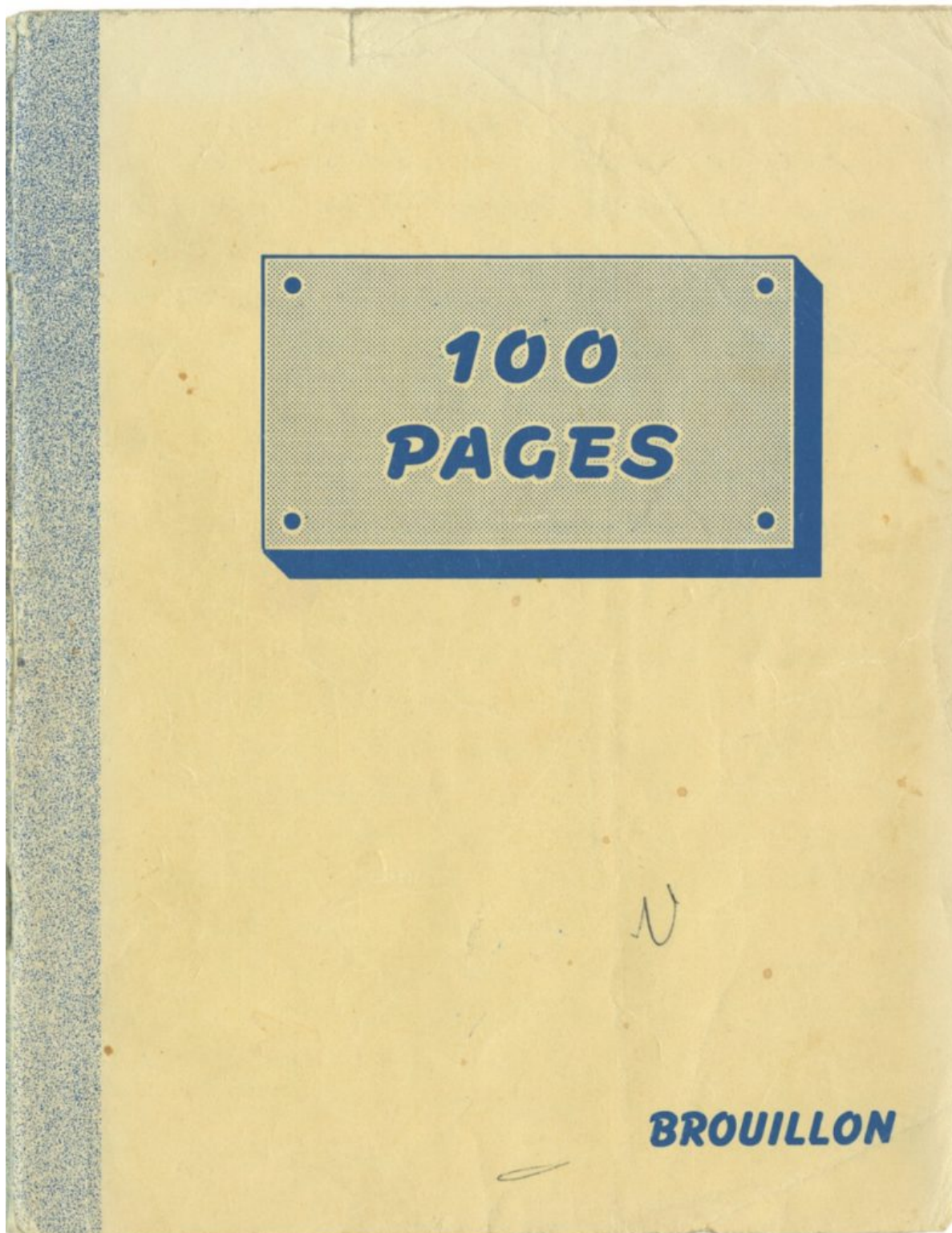
writings, which were handwritten in 1945-46.

For years, nobody touched that box. I dared not open it out of fear of discovering the account of even greater suffering, of even more monstrous torture, of medical experiments carried out on Nazi prisoners... and who knows what else?"

Even after the deaths of both his parents, Roger recalls, that box stayed closed, inviolate, terrorizing me.

Roger goes on to relate how a growing sense of responsibility, in particular to his own son, that he should release the memories of his father and allow his story to be told, however gruesome and fearsome, continued to drive him towards opening the box. He could not bring himself to do it, however, until 2005, after attending the event with the orphans of Buchenwald. One can imagine the intensity of emotion, anxiety and fear, of a *big moment* unfolding as Roger went back to his office directly from that event and pulled the box down from its shelf, untied the string that bound it, and opened it. There within lay the manuscripts written by his father Alter, composed in four school notebooks of various colors – and written entirely in Polish.

Once again, Alter had gone to pains to be sure his son would never know his experiences, hiding them behind the impenetrable fortress of a foreign language. Roger had faced his fears in opening the box, but was not any closer to knowing his father's truth.



Another of Alter's notebooks

Part of the story of this book, then, involves the remarkable genealogical, historiographical and linguistic journey that led to the translation of Alter's manuscripts into Italian, to then be presented in the newly published book, *Cosa ho visto ad Auschwitz* (*What I Saw at Auschwitz*). In

its scope and ambition, the volume goes well beyond being a memoir of compelling historical value to something broader, opening up to us the world of those who came after, the children of the survivors. Their parents' experiences and memories, as much as they went unspoken, have had a dramatic impact on their lives nevertheless:

But then, through interactions with men and women of my generation, children of deportees or "hidden children" during World War Two – with whom I have been able to speak about this more freely in recent times (because at first we could not, even though we visited each other) – I understood that we were all weighed down by a terrible burden, which has allowed each of us to construct ourselves in a particular way and to become, each in their own way, the bearers of memories, suffering, and pain, but also of hope and dreams for the future.

Eighty years ago, memories of the most brutally unimaginable sort so weighed upon Alter Fajnzyberg that he was compelled to put some of it down in writing, on paper, in his own words. In doing so, one can only wonder, as Roger still does, to what degree, if any, it eased his pain. Never intending to share his writing with anyone else as he did, we can only speculate – and perhaps hope – that the endeavor offered him some comfort. Yet, for those who came after him, for his children and grandchildren, those hidden memories that he, and so many other Holocaust survivors, tried to protect their descendants from, remained and will remain a terrible burden. Thus, we can be grateful to Roger Fajnzyberg for his courage in opening the box, facing the truth of memory and then sharing both his father's work and his own inner perceptions with us, because he should not bear such a burden alone, and in reading the words of a son giving his father such a unique and necessary tribute, we too may share the burden, with him and others like him, in some small measure.



Cover Image: *Alter Fajnzyberg in front of the ovens of the Krematorium at the Auschwitz camp in 1985 (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, negative no. 2I202/22).*

English citations from the book translated by Paul Rosenberg

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