Primo Levi noted in “The Gray Zone,” chapter two of his monumental *The Drowned and the Saved*, that Nazi camps presented prisoners a morally ambiguous universe fraught with what Lawrence Langer would later term “choiceless choices.” Prisoners struggled within a context that was mostly beyond their control and made decisions negatively impacting the lives of other prisoners. Isaiah Trunk’s study examining the controversial *Judenräte* also illustrated Jewish responses to the extreme circumstances of the ghettos. These three scholars did more than any others to advance a nuanced approach: after the publication of their studies, no serious Holocaust scholar would portray the victims’ responses to persecution in black-and-white terms.¹

Tuvia Friling, a renowned scholar of Zionism and modern Jewish history at Ben-Gurion University, continues in this tradition of superb scholarship with his latest study, which chronicles the story of Eliezer Gruenbaum (also known as Leon Berger), the son of noted Polish Zionist leader Yitzhak Gruenbaum. Friling traces the younger Gruenbaum’s political development in Poland as a young Communist; his activity in Paris among Polish Communist émigrés; his role as a volunteer on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War; his eventual arrest and deportation to Auschwitz; his controversial actions as a kapo and prisoner in Auschwitz, Birkenau, Javischowitz (an Auschwitz sub-camp), and Buchenwald; the postwar political and legal problems resulting from his wartime activities; his death in the Israeli War of Independence; and the eventual role his life, death, and memory played in the creation of postwar survivor and Israeli identity. This is no small task, as the search for primary sources for the life and death of this polarizing figure took Friling and his research assistants to several countries. Friling performs it competently and gracefully.

The chronological analysis aims to accomplish two goals. Friling hopes first to fully describe Eliezer’s actions and motivations in the Nazi camps. The fragmentary, biased, and highly contentious sources prevent a full reconstruction. Gruenbaum maintained a consistent defense, but Friling correctly approaches his sources with a keen skeptical eye. Eliezer claimed that he reluctantly became a kapo at the behest of his Party comrades; that in his capacity as kapo he worked to help develop a vibrant camp underground and to shield Party members and the other prisoners from the harshest of Nazi camp policies; that if he beat prisoners, he did so to prevent intervention by SS guards. Occasional brutality, he argued, allowed him to remain a kapo, thus ensuring his ability to alleviate the harshest of camp conditions. But questions remain. Did he beat prisoners to death, as some witnesses alleged? Could Eliezer have achieved his stated goals without becoming a kapo? Friling recognizes the impossibility of a definitive answer. At any rate, he seems more concerned with the role Eliezer’s story played in creating collective Holocaust memory in Israel.
This concern leads to Friling’s second aim: to trace the development of four separate retrospective narratives—“the Communist narrative, the Haredi narrative, the Zionist narrative, and the personal and family narrative” (p. 260). Friling has much more success in analyzing various Jewish groups’ use of Eliezer’s story to forward differing political agendas during Israel’s creation. The Communist Party conducted the first inquiries into Eliezer’s role as kapo. The Communist leadership soon realized, however, that Eliezer and other Party comrades who served as prisoner functionaries posed a danger to the Party’s image in France and Poland. Admitting that Party members collaborated in the camps was too embarrassing, and so the Party washed its hands of the investigations and of Eliezer. In contrast, Friling reports, “the Haredi narrative grew out of that community’s need to link the father to the son” (p. 260). As bitter enemies of political Zionism, Haredi community leaders hoped to undermine a perceived political enemy, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, and with him Zionist ideology. By painting Eliezer’s actions during the war in the worst possible light, the Haredi could then blame Zionism and its supporters for the Holocaust. As Friling points out, however, Eliezer did not support Zionism. The Haredi narrative thus ignored basic facts in order to forward a political agenda.

Zionists had a much tougher time coming to terms with the life and death of Eliezer himself. The new nation needed heroes in the wake of the War of Independence, but Zionists seemed reluctant to embrace a Communist former kapo who disdained Zionism—even one who had died fighting for Israel’s independence.

Friling betrays his sympathy for Yitzhak Gruenbaum’s quest to secure the release of his son from French custody and to rehabilitate the family’s reputation. The narrative constructed by Eliezer and his father had support among a small group of family and friends. However, it remained the only narrative that acknowledged the complex nature of camp life, even as it downplayed Eliezer’s more questionable actions.

In the end, the use and abuse of Eliezer’s life and death frustrate Friling. He views the posturing as detrimental to historical truth, concluding: “These narratives all seek to blame someone and are less concerned with the roots, reasons, and circumstances of his actions. . . . To this day [they] struggle with each other for hegemony over a collective memory that is in any case shattered” (p. 260).

The fragmentary nature of the sources shapes the organization of Friling’s narrative. For example, chapters 6–8 provide the few known details of Eliezer’s time in the camps. They frustrate the reader somewhat with their lack of information, providing a brief summary of camp life with hints of Eliezer’s role and actions hiding in the margins of the drama. Only in later chapters does one come to recognize the skill of the storyteller. As Friling begins his discussion of the numerous investigations into Eliezer’s case, he reveals more details about the accusations and Eliezer’s time in the camps. The organization provides a sense of how the survivors may have experienced the postwar ordeal, having only bits and pieces of knowledge and unable to see the bigger picture.

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The scholarly contribution of this study is substantial, but it is potentially useful for professors of historical methodology courses as well. For example, Friling’s analysis of the inquiries conducted could serve as a case study of the inherent biases of sources, of the evolution of witness testimony over time, and of the need to sift through conflicting reports to approximate the past. Weaknesses in interpretation could prove instructive as well. The discussion of Eliezer’s death proves problematic. The way he died is just as important as the way he lived in the camps. Friling offers four possible scenarios, three of which remain mere speculation. While the stories are contradictory, Friling errs by giving each the same weight. The first story, which is the most probable, alleges that Eliezer succumbed to enemy fire. The second story has a fellow soldier murdering Eliezer in the heat of battle in retaliation for the former kapo’s past. Another story has a suicidal Eliezer acting recklessly during battle in order to end the enormous pressure he suffered as a result of his past. The last story combines elements of the previous two stories and posits a unit of soldiers who offer Eliezer a way out: either die in battle a hero or be “fragged” by his comrades.

These problems pale in comparison to the book’s strengths, however. Friling presents a solid study that should be required reading.

Note

Mark A. Mengerink
Lamar University
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Assimilated Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, 1940–1943, Katarzyna Person (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), xiii + 239 pp., hardcover $34.95.

This assiduously researched volume offers a critical and judicious analysis of the experience of assimilated Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. The scope of the study is modest. Yet, as the author convincingly argues, assimilated Jews—though still a minority within the broader community—were active in Jewish organizations and highly visible. They were also the object of considerable commentary, much of it tinged with suspicion and hostility. As in the era prior to the war, their perceived advantages of education, wealth, status, and privilege, as well as their devotion to Polish language and culture, cast doubt upon the depth of their identification with and concern for their fellow Jews. Still, it is the merit of this study to add nuance to common assumptions