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Categories

NONFICTION

Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide

David G. Roskies and Naomi Diamant

Review

Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide is the first major attempt to define and catalog the full range of Holocaust literature in all languages and genres, from the “Memory Books” that began to appear in the first weeks after the war up through the beginning of the twenty-first century. The co-authors, David Roskies and Naomi Diamant, begin with a capacious definition of their subject as “All forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it.” They state matter-of-factly that they will study Holocaust literature “as literature,” a position that is by no means obvious and which allows for some interesting and original observations. Roskies and Diamant usefully separate the wartime writers living in the “Jew-zone” (anywhere in occupied Europe, where, as the authors trenchantly put it, any Jew still alive by 1943 was “a statistical error”) from those in the “free zone,” primarily the United States and Palestine—a division that does the service of bringing together all the Yiddish-speaking writers of the ghettos (Abraham Sutzkever In Vilna, Yitzhak Katznelson in Warsaw, and so on). The book’s chronological approach has the salutary effect of demonstrating just how much of this literature was created either during the war or in the years immediately following it, a corrective to the conventional wisdom that tends to regard the decade or so after the war as a literary gap.

The book’s second half is devoted to a “Guide to the First Hundred Books,” which Roskies and Diamant present as a “suggested reading list ... on an even playing field, with equal time given to all”: each book receives about a page of description and criticism. There are some interesting inclusions—and exclusions. I was glad to see the authors making a claim for the lesser-known Yiddish writers, as well as championing some of the more difficult and controversial fiction of the Holocaust, especially Piotr Rawicz’s 1961 novel *Blood from the Sky*, a brilliantly surreal work of fiction. On the other hand, I take issue with the inclusion of *Suite Française* by Irène Nemirovsky, which the authors point out rightly has the feel of a “collaborationist novel,” and which, despite the well-known circumstances of its discovery and publication, does not in any way describe the experience of Jews in France. And the authors are harder on Jerzy Kosinski, author of *The Painted Bird*, which was once thought to be an autobiographical novel, than they are on Benjamin Wilkomirski, whose pseudo-memoir, *Fragments*, has been thoroughly discredited. Finally, I would have liked to see a work by a member of the “third generation,” the survivors’ grandchildren, such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*. As Roskies and Diamant

and forward”; previously unknown works will undoubtedly continue to appear, and those still to be written will have a new perspective on the ever-evolving significance of the Holocaust in our culture.
