

Tauber Institute Newsletter - Author Spotlight

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Could you describe this book in your own words?

The book is a study of literary writing by people imprisoned in Nazi ghettos in Poland (specifically, the ghettos in Warsaw, Lodz, and Vilna) during the unfolding catastrophe we now call the Holocaust. The writings I explore are far-ranging but not at all exhaustive. Rather than cataloguing ghetto literature, the book tries to attend patiently to how literature served ghetto writers as a rich, complex, and capacious means for thinking about their drastically changed and ever more terrifying situations. These literary works certainly have documentary value, but what they document most powerfully is the profound roles that literature played for people thinking through, in real time, their place in the world, in humanity, and in Jewish and European cultural traditions. The ghettos were places where Jews were horribly victimized but also places that required and inspired reassessments, from the radical margins, of cultural discourses and institutions that in less calamitous times might not have been questioned. The book is, finally, a study of how people in extremis actively and often brilliantly thought with, against, and at the limits of literary genres and traditions.

Could you describe your research process as you wrote this book?

It was a long journey. The most direct inspiration for the book was a Hess Faculty Seminar at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2007 co-led by Sara Horowitz and David Roskies on "Literature and the Holocaust." As a US-trained Comparative Literature and Literary Theory PhD, I was inspired by Sara's fine and theoretically subtle readings of traumatic texts, and the world of literary writing authored by victims during the war years that David opened up to me came as a revelation. I had studied Yiddish at the YIVO summer program in 2004 (allow me a shout out to my teachers Elke Kellman and Sheva Zucker for giving me a foundation to build on), and I decided then to redouble my efforts to improve my Yiddish sufficiently to be able to work on this corpus. I couldn't believe that it had been so understudied amid so much attention to Holocaust literature written after the Shoah. I felt like I could see work that truly needed to be undertaken, and felt that if I pushed myself I could make a meaningful contribution. I had to finish another book ahead of turning to this project full steam, but the seed was planted then. In terms of archives, I regrettably was not able to travel (to Poland or Lithuania or Israel) during my Covid-era sabbatical, so my research was in electronic rather than physical archives. The USHMM has electronic copies of the whole Oyneg Shabes archive, which permitted me to conduct my research stateside.

In your opinion why has there not been much previous research into these bodies of work?

A number of reasons come to mind. For one, for scholars of my generation—I was trained in the 1990s—there was precious little in the dominant approaches to Holocaust literature that would send a budding scholar to the archives. The paradigm of unspeakability was in full swing in its various theoretical guises, including different iterations of trauma theory. Why invest the effort to learn Yiddish or Polish, say, and attempt to read the vast archival records left by victims when the most profound things that victims have to tell us inhere in their silences, not their words? It was a paradigm that attuned us, importantly, to listening to absences but alas at the cost of perpetuating the neglect of a great amount of speech that was very much available and calling out to be heard. (I must quickly add that I have not learned Polish: I am pointing to problems in the field, not suggesting I don't also embody those problems!)

The other reason I'll mention is that the field of Holocaust Studies as it emerged in North American and Western European universities was focused almost completely on the perpetrators of the Holocaust, not the victims. What was significant about the victims from the point of view of the dominant trends of Holocaust historiography was not their culture, perspectives, or thought, but only that they were persecuted and murdered. That was a significance bestowed on them by their murderers, not one they made themselves. My book adds to a growing body of scholarly work emphasizing victims' experience and perspectives, but this approach was a relatively belated development in the field of Holocaust Studies. Or rather, in the field as it became institutionalized, for as Samuel Kassow, Laura Jockusch, Mark Smith, among others, have shown us, the earliest historians of the Holocaust—already during and just after WWII—were East European Jews, mostly victims in their own right. But they lacked the institutional, political, financial, and cultural clout to set the parameters for the study of the Holocaust. The genocide was both biological and cultural, and it was devastating in both regards. It is darkly ironic that the reason that East European Jewish culture was never (and largely is still not) considered integral to Holocaust Studies is because the Holocaust wiped out East European Jews and their culture.

Did any particular text or author fundamentally change your own understanding of literature's capacity in times of atrocity?

In one way or another, all the texts I spend time with in this book did that. I'm slightly ashamed to admit that when I thought of what people must have been writing in the ghettos before I dove into this project, I didn't imagine that people would be thinking so profoundly through distinctly literary means. I assumed that the misery must have been so oppressive that urgent material concerns would have left no room for literary and metaliterary reflection. It's important not to underestimate the ways that this was surely true; many people's voices were undoubtably stifled entirely. Nonetheless, the amount of brilliant literary thinking to be found in the writings that have come down to us is rather astounding. Prewar East European Jewish culture was profoundly literary, and people in ghettos drew on literature to think through their predicaments right up to the boarder of physical and cultural death. Two texts in particular stand out in this regard. In his

autobiographical short story “Chronicle of a Single Day,” Leyb Goldin articulates the experience of starving in the Warsaw ghetto via implicit and explicit dialogue with works of Jewish and European literary modernism by I.L. Peretz, Knut Hamsun, Thomas Mann, and Arthur Schnitzler. Writing not only *about* the temporal experience of the hungering self in the Warsaw ghetto but writing also *at* the threshold of physiological and psychological dissolution through starvation, Goldin offers an equally sympathetic and devastating critique of the limits of what European modernism was able to imagine. The second example I would point to is “Woe to You,” Yitzkhak Katzenelson’s poem of spring 1942 relentlessly cursing the Germans for the murder of the Jewish people it foresees. The text apostrophizes the Germans, but in Yiddish, a language they would not have been able to understand. The poem, we might say, speaks at the Germans but to or for a particular Yiddish speaking audience, one that foresees its imminent collective murder. Katzenelson deploys the temporal dynamics of lyric poetry to depict the collective death of European Jews and yet to speak, virulently and hauntingly, from the other side of death. It is simply astonishing.

What projects have you embarked on since finishing this book?

Reading for *Making and Unmaking Literature* I was gripped by a number of authors and texts that did not fit in this project. What unites them are questions regarding the status of ethical thinking during the unfolding calamity. Most scholarship involving ethics and the Holocaust has focused on the perpetration and implication in the perpetration of the genocidal crimes, and with lessons and legacies of the genocide. In my new project I am interested in the articulation of ethical thought and judgment by victims in real time and the crises that ethical frameworks met with under the unprecedented circumstances. Ethics are so central to how we understand our relationship to people and events and ourselves as human beings with agency and responsibility. How both secular and religious ethical frameworks retained validity and authority or were effectively suspended by the extreme circumstances are questions that many Holocaust victims grappled with profoundly and across disparate genres including diaries and chronicles (e.g., Zelig Kalmanovitsh and Cael Perechodnik), musar sermons (e.g. Yitskhok Bernshteyn), reportage and testimony (e.g. Yehoshue Perle), short fiction (e.g. Shaye Shpigl), and poetry. I am particularly interested in Vilna ghetto poems by Avrom Sutzkever such as “Song for the Last.” Although Sutzkever published his ghetto poems in several works after the war, often in reconstructed or revised versions, ghetto manuscripts of “Song for the Last” and many other poems were unearthed in Vilnius as recently as 2017. In general, the distinction between texts written during the unfolding events and those written or rewritten in retrospect is enormously significant, as already Ringelblum appreciated in his reflections on the need to collect materials in the Warsaw ghetto in real time, and as scholars including Kassow, Alan Mintz, Roskies, and Yechiel Szeintuch, have emphasized. The unresolved perspective on the still-unfolding cataclysmic events that characterizes works written during rather than after the Holocaust is at the heart of *Making and Unmaking Literature* and will continue to be crucial for the new project on ethical thinking in the midst of the catastrophe.