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Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide

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BOOK REVIEW

Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide, by David G. Roskies and Naomi Diamant, Waltham, MA, Brandeis University Press, 2013, 368 pp., 28 ill. (8 colour), US\$35.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-61168-358-5, US\$85.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-61168-357-8

Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide opens with a personal story of Holocaust remembrance in the early 1960s in Montreal, when one of the authors, David G. Roskies, was 15 years old. His was a childhood steeped in Yiddish folksongs; his mother used to sing the songs of her mother, who owned a famous publishing house, the Matz Press, in Vilnius before the war. Many of the writers she published would later find refuge in her literary salon in Canada. Growing up far away from the geographical landscapes of horror from which his ancestors fled, Roskies' intellectual trajectory has led him back time and again to exactly those places. His approach to the Holocaust, or, more precisely, to the convoluted genre of secular Holocaust literature, places it in a *longue durée* of Jewish responses to catastrophe, the major concern of a lifetime of research.

This book, published as part of the Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry, and which Roskies co-wrote with Naomi Diamant, starts, quite simply, from the beginning: giving 'artistic primacy and moral priority to what came first' (p. 6). With this return to chronology and to texts as they appeared in 12 original languages, country by country, the authors hope to break open the walls of Auschwitz as the '*telos*' of the Western intellectual world, the point zero, the birthplace of postmodernism. Instead, the polyphony of voices, as they rose from the ashes, now rises up again from the pages of this book, restored to their original condition of chaos, pain and hope. By reading the sources 'before time, in time, and against time' (p. 19), the authors challenge the idea of a 'latency period' or silence following the end of the war, on the part of both survivors and their surroundings, a silence that was only broken by the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961.

In doing so, Roskies and Diamant are part of a larger trend in current scholarship that has convincingly shown that there was, actually, no silence at all at the end of the war. On the contrary: as Hasia Diner, David Cesarani and Laura Jockusch have all recently demonstrated, a mentality of 'collect and record' and fervent documentation efforts characterised the early post-war years, with literary responses among them. Reasons, however, for the perceived silence are many; one of them, as Roskies and Diamant argue, is that for Holocaust literature to speak anew, 'every generation [...] had to see itself as the first to bear witness' (p. 126), to be 'scandalized' by it anew (p. 180). Yet by 'breaking down the terrors of history into a story that is once familiar and very new' (p. 40), restoring texts to their original contexts, the authors make a vertiginous journey into new characters, landscapes, modes of interpretation, and terms of art.

Perhaps the most controversial, or 'vulgar', of these terms is 'Jew-Zone', to indicate those spheres of wartime experience that went beyond geography and the boundaries of observable reality – as opposed to the 'Free Zone', where 'the imagination roamed free'. To live and write in the 'Jew-Zone' meant to lie, to hide, to censor and to encrypt. Is it the texts born from this experience that were the first to contribute to 'the unfolding

of the Holocaust in public memory', a process the authors trace in four subsequent phases.

This categorisation into distinct periods of Holocaust literature is based on the desire to 'read ethically', that is, 'in time', so as to keep the story in the present. The first period covers the war years, from 1938 to 1945, in the two separate zones of East and West, Jew and non-Jew. While protest and trying to raise awareness of the atrocities being committed 'over there' was a strong impetus for writers in the West, those herded into ghettos concentrated on resistance by establishing archives and singing songs of bereavement. After the deportations, when a living Jew became a 'statistical error', metonymy turned into myth, and the Holocaust became 'its own archetype' (p. 43). The fact that 'proportionally more paper was saved than human lives' (p. 44) meant quite literally that a genre such as 'Holocaust literature' could come into being at all.

During the second period, 1945 to 1960, survivors directed their testimonies inwards, delving into a vast pool of Jewish communal memory. 'Insider symbols' such as prisoner tattoos, stars of David, barbed wire and chimneys adorned the covers of reportorial fiction based on living memory. Yet the window of testimonial creation that opened after the war closed again in 1948, when Communism descended onto those parts of Europe where most of the crimes had been committed. Thus ensued the illusion of silence that ended in 1961, when survival witnesses took the stand against the man in the glass box in Jerusalem. For the first time, the suffering masses begot a face, quite real and terrifying in their attempts to give voice to the horror. This shock initiated the third phase of 'provisional memory', which lasted until 1985. Stories turned away from the communal into the individual and existential, unhinged, furthermore, from their source languages and into those in which they could be relived. This phase, during which the sacred memory of the dead clashed with the desire to reopen the wounds, ended with the arrival of Holocaust literature on the shores of the United States. There it began, in a language and a topography alien to its birthplace, its last phase, in which we still find ourselves today.

From 1985 onwards, second and third generation writers have been grappling with the legacy of places they have never been but which left them in a 'metaphysical state of brokenness' (p. 158), a condition of being split at the heart perhaps only to be salvaged through art. Child protagonists meet their adult narrators in dense 'Jewspeak' that communicates the archaeology of individual selves tied to the literary theme of return. All of these voices, together with those that came before, make up the guide that closes the book, listing the first 100 titles of Holocaust literature in order of appearance. This very basic chronological approach to the subject actually helps to restore the overwhelming complexity and magnitude of texts, returning each one anew to the ash-strewn fields of recent history. With its strident tone, yet steeped in a poetry absent from most academic works, this book is both poignant and political.

Yet the book contains one glaring omission. 'Until [Elie] Wiesel', Roskies and Diamant write, 'Hungarian Jewry had not yet been heard from' (p. 107), referring to the 1956 publication of ... *And the World was Silent*, better known as *Night*. This is a stubborn notion that despite its persistence is entirely false. While it is true that the majority of Hungarian Jewish writers were killed in the Holocaust, those who survived began publishing their memoirs and documentary fiction as early as 1944. Close to 30 texts have been identified as 'early Holocaust fiction' between 1944 and 1948 alone —of which Béla Zsolt's *Nine Suitcases* (1948) and Ernő Szép's *The Smell of Humans* (1945) are only the best known. Emerging from the largest Jewish community to survive in Central Europe, this corpus deserves a full and detailed mention. To conclude, and with this

critical omission in mind, *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* is a heart-wrenching encounter with an endless stream of people who emerged from the void and chose to write about what happened to them.

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