

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Carol Ascher.** *Afterimages: A Family Memoir.* Teaneck: Holmes & Meier, 2008. xiii + 226 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8419-1449-0.



**Geoffrey H. Hartman.** *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. x + 195 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2832-4.

**Bruno Schwebel.** *As Luck Would Have It: My Exile in France and Mexico: Recollections and Stories.* Translated and with an afterword by Michael Winkler. Studies in Austrian Literature, Culture, and Thought—Biography, Autobiography, Memoirs Series. Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2008. 222 pp. \$24.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57241-157-9.



**Hilde Spiel.** *The Dark and the Bright: Memoirs 1911-1989.* Translated and with an introduction by Christine Shuttleworth. Afterword by Felix de Mendelssohn. Studies in Austrian Literature, Culture, and Thought-Translation Series. Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2007. iv + 444 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57241-154-8.



**Reviewed by** Thomas Pegelow Kaplan (Department of History, Davidson College)

**Published on** H-German (June, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

### Remembering the Struggles and Experiences of Exile: The Voices of Holocaust Refugees

In the early twenty-first century, the Holocaust has long come to play a significant role in public and scholarly discourse. Even in the United States, a country far removed from the former killing sites in eastern Europe, the study of the Nazi genocide of the European Jews has firmly entered public school curricula and course offerings at colleges and universities. A still growing number of memorials, including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, have further contributed to the rise in Holocaust consciousness and helped to institutionalize the commemoration of this mass crime. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, which Annette Wieviorka has aptly described as the beginning of the “age of the witness,” American presses, finally, have supported these developments by publishing hundreds of autobiographical texts, especially by Jewish survivors of Nazi concentration camps.[1] In light of this remarkable landscape of offerings, an Auschwitz survivor recently told me that she was reluctant to write about her suffering at the hands of the Nazis for fear of having nothing “new” to add. And yet, the study of the Holocaust warrants ever more attention and novel approaches. One subfield that has emerged more prominently in recent years is the study of German and Austrian Jewish refugees and other citizens of Jewish ancestry who managed to escape the countries of their birth before the war. Recently, memoirs by these refugees have reached the book market in growing numbers, adding to our understanding and knowledge of the struggles of these victims of Nazi Germany.

The recent proliferation of refugee memoirs further reflects the broader phenomenon of collecting and publishing the testimonies of the last generation of Holocaust survivors. Now in their eighties, these child survivors are nearing the end of their lives. Large-scale projects such as the Visual History Archive (VHA) of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute have amassed tens of thousands of testimonies since the 1990s. The VHA has been consistent in categorizing former camp inmates and refugees as survivors. In so doing, the VHA has helped to validate further the experiences of exiles, whom early accounts often sharply differentiated from the “true” Holocaust survivors of the camps and ghettos of eastern Europe. Moreover, new historical studies of Jewish refugees have helped to raise awareness and contributed to scholarly interest in these exiles’ struggles.[2] Lastly, reluctance about and even occasional hostility toward the in-

corporation of written and oral testimonies into the study of the past among an older generation of academic historians has largely disappeared. Outbursts such as the late Wolfgang Mommsen’s heated questioning of the value of these accounts, as conveyed by Geoffrey Hartman, rarely take place any longer. A generation of younger scholars in Holocaust studies has readily—even if not uncritically—drawn on these testimonies. While the broader public has showed a consistent interest in survivor memoirs, increased scholarly and institutional attention has significantly aided in the dissemination of these narratives by camp survivors and refugees alike.

As in the case of the camp and ghetto survivors’ accounts, exile memoirs assume a variety of forms, ranging from intellectual contemplations by accomplished academics to mixed accounts of autobiographical and fictional writing by exiles with multiple career paths. While the autobiographical texts by camp survivors and exiles share many narrative techniques and genre conventions, refugee memoirs also add new foci. Most distinctly, they place the experiences and struggles of the authors’ often long and rich lives after the escape from Adolf Hitler’s Europe at the center of their reflections. Nearly all conventional camp and ghetto survivor accounts, by contrast, end with liberation and a short glimpse into their authors’ postwar lives, often in the Americas or the new state of Israel.[3] The four works under review reflect these multiple tendencies and shed light on the impact of displacement, the gendering of experiences and narratives, and the richness and limits of memory.

Geoffrey Hartman’s (b.1929) concise memoir aims at sketching the author’s intellectual development from his student days at an English grammar school to the height of his career as one of the leading literary critics in the U.S. academic system. Hartman is Sterling Professor Emeritus and Senior Research Scholar of English and Comparative Literature at Yale and project director of the school’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. He envisions his text as a “defense” of the wealth and diversity of literary studies. The book also serves as a justification of Hartman’s own professional decisions, such as his embrace of Derridean deconstruction and his cooperation with Paul de Man, whose wartime collaboration with the Nazi occupiers became known shortly after his death. While long segments of Hartman’s text are

strikingly impersonal and reflect on key debates in literary criticism, the author provides fascinating insights into the ways in which his experience of replacement has shaped his writing. Born into a German Jewish family in Frankfurt am Main, Hartman managed to escape Germany on a *Kindertransport* to England in 1939. Due to the outbreak of the war, he was not able to reunite with his mother in New York until August 1945.

The memoirs of Bruno Schwebel (b. 1928) are purposefully more personal and emotional. Schwebel's text organizes recollections that emerged in the course of return trips to the author's native Austria and the route of his family's escape from Hitler's Europe. He wrote to relive his flight and long decades in exile in Mexico, while giving his "pent-up emotions free reign" (Schwebel, p. 194). In line with the genre, the memoir offers a picture of Schwebel's life that assures him of his present sense of self. This recent English translation of Schwebel's autobiographical writings is largely based on the Austrian edition (2004). In addition, the book integrates ten fictional short stories that further communicate experiences of exile. Like most authors of recently published refugee memoirs, Schwebel was still a child when he managed to flee from his homeland within months after its March 1938 annexation. Together with his Jewish father and Catholic-born mother, who had converted to Judaism, he escaped first to France and then via Spain and Portugal to Mexico, where they arrived in March 1942.

The memoir of the late Hilde Spiel (1911-90), by contrast, follows even more standard generic conventions and does not include overtly fictional passages. The text of the Viennese-born author and journalist reflects at length on her coming of age as a public intellectual and dwells on her professional and private interactions in interwar Austria, pre- and wartime Britain, and postwar central Europe. Spiel's memoir, completed towards the end of her life, first appeared in a two-volume installment in German in 1989-90 and found a ready reception.<sup>[4]</sup> Her daughter, Christine Shuttleworth, has now completed an English-language translation. Known to a German- and English-speaking audience for novels such as *Flute and Drums* (1947) and *Fanny von Arnstein* (1962), Spiel provides her readers with a richly textured account of her struggle for belonging and deeply troubled relationship with Austria. Spiel grew up in the middle-class home of assimilated parents who had both converted from Judaism to Catholicism. After earning her doctorate at the University of Vienna, the socialist-leaning Spiel left the semi-fascist *StÃ¤ndestaats* in October 1936 for England. In the early months after the *AnschluÃ¶*, her parents also

managed to escape and join her in London. The Nazi state categorized them and their daughter as "racially Jewish." Unlike Hartman and Schwebel, Spiel, however, returned to central Europe after the war and took up permanent residence in Austria in 1963.

Carol Ascher (b. 1941), finally, has written a complex family memoir that forcefully demonstrates the long-lasting impact of refugee experiences. The author was born in Topeka, Kansas, shortly after her refugee parents' arrival on the American mainland and in the year the United States formally entered the war against Germany. *Afterimages* brings together two separate, yet intrinsically related accounts. An examination of Ascher's experiences of growing up in a refugee community in the U.S. Midwest precedes her elaborate reconstruction of the interwar life of her Ã©migrÃ© father, a Jewish Viennese scholar who had helped to establish psychoanalytical pedagogy. This latter reconstruction unfolds by way of a reflection on Ascher's 1995 visit to Vienna, where she unearthed the remnants of her father's past. The author presents her recollections as an "odyssey" that confronts her readers with what she has "learned and ... become" (Ascher, p. x). These recollections are both noticeably idiosyncratic and indicative of struggles by members of the second generation with their refugee heritage, their parents' pain, and attempts to become American. The author holds a Ph.D. in anthropology and education from Columbia University. Prior to publishing this family memoir, Ascher completed several books, including a study of Simone de Beauvoir and *The Flood* (1987), a novel for young adults on Austrian refugees in Kansas. Her work thus testifies to the overlapping approaches to confronting past suffering in fictional, autobiographical, and scholarly writing.

These four memoirs' insights and arguments are as diverse as their objectives, scope, and genre variations. Still, several major overlapping themes and main observations stand out. First among them are multilayered questions of displacement and belonging that are inherently tied to the refugee experience. Hartman conveys how he, a displaced child from Germany, encountered William Wordsworth's poetry in the English countryside. In the absence of his family and familiar surroundings, he embraced the poet and found a new language and home. Hartman's memoir, meanwhile, continually undermines easy inferences. Hartman dubs himself an "Unexile" who has never felt "like an exile," and comfortably continued to use his mother tongue and read J. W. von Goethe's works (Hartman, p. 148). Nonetheless, a sense of displacement and discontinuity resurfaces time and again.

Hartman's turn from Romanticism to the study of memory, trauma, and the Holocaust around 1980 emerges as an attempt to "repair" his own life that he began along with his wife, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen. Hartman's ongoing sense of personal discontinuity has continued to prompt him to cherish and analyze apparent ruptures in difficult literary texts and oral testimonies.

Spiel's memoir presents a life shaped by a continual struggle for belonging and against alienation triggered by the ruptures of exile. She muses in the second part of her book, borrowing from Ludwig Wittgenstein, that she could not work without England; life without Vienna was similarly unimaginable. As a refugee and eventually a British citizen, Spiel struggled to assimilate to life in pre- and wartime London. Her writing stresses the crucial importance of the city's PEN chapter, which provided something close to a "feeling of being at home" (Spiel, p. 107). In the end, all her efforts were not sufficient. She became aware that she could not disentangle herself from Austrian and German literature, journalism, theater, and music and that she needed to return. Amidst painful encounters with old Nazis and new antisemitism, Spiel's text wavers between describing her native city as reclaimed "home" and regretting the decision to come back. Even the PEN "family" eventually failed to sustain her. The Austrian chapter expelled Spiel under the pretext that she had mismanaged funds to help Jewish and other dissident writers from eastern Europe. The author projects a life of dislocation and ongoing journeys that fell short of regaining a "home."

Second, the struggles of refugees from Hitler's Europe were not limited to their agonies over displacement and the loss of a previous sense of self. As earlier works have demonstrated, these conflicts were also replete with immense material hardship that, in turn, remained tied to a remaking of identity and the psychological strains of exile. Studies by trauma analysts, for example, have conventionally stressed the crippling impact of the refugees' experiences on their later personal and professional lives.<sup>[5]</sup> On one hand, the four memoirs furnish ample evidence for these struggles. Ascher shows how her father threw himself into his work in the United States after his escape from Vienna had ended a promising career. He frequently discarded and changed analytical approaches and moved his wife and daughters from coast to coast for new jobs. In the end, however, he remained dissatisfied, having to come to terms with the many discontinuities of his life and rather "spotty accomplishments" (Ascher, p. 211). Ascher also demonstrates how the anger and humiliation that her parents

experienced as refugees became part of her upbringing and sense of self. Time and again, the broader refugee heritage interfered with her attempts to build an American life. Schwebel, too, communicates stories of hardship tied to the strains of exile. Most strikingly, his father continued to suffer from trauma as late as the 1970s. At the end of a hard life with many professional failures, he exclaimed that Gestapo agents were at the door and still out to get him.

On the other hand, however, the memoirs also reveal a remarkable degree of personal adjustment and professional achievement that defies claims about the universally crippling effects of persecution and exile. While most literary exiles from Germany and Austria did not produce major works in the language of their new homes, Hilde Spiel's account traces her successful efforts to master the English language and join the society of London's writers. The city's press became her most crucial "teacher." Schwebel's memoir, too, provides powerful examples. It sketches how the son of a former socialist government administrator translated his lack of direction into a multifaceted career that included stints as technical director of one of Mexico's television networks, instructor at a polytechnic institute, stage actor, and writer.

Third, the female and male memoirists of these accounts bring salient gender differences in refugee experiences and narratives into sharper focus. Even in instances in which Nazi henchmen, Mexican immigration officials, or British businessmen treated Jewish men and women in a similar manner, male and female refugees often experienced and narrated these encounters differently. Spiel's writings convey how her father, a courageous and gifted chemist, repeatedly tried, but failed, to solicit support from the British government for his invention to produce synthetic rubber. Consistently out of luck and work, he was eventually reduced to jobs clearing rubble from the German air attacks. Exile undermined his conception of manhood. His refugee experience was, Spiel writes, "killing him as surely as a Nazi concentration camp would have done" (Spiel, p. 140). He died in July 1945. When Spiel encountered professional obstacles of her own, she, too, remained persistent. Committed to a public persona as an English and European writer and critic, Spiel portrayed her former self as much more adept and resourceful than most older male refugees. She explicitly defied gender expectations that reduced mothers to nursing and child-rearing, left her young children with nannies, and took early postwar assignments as a journalist on the Continent. Moreover, the very manner in which the authors recall and include

specific memories is, as Pascale Bos has argued, distinctly gendered.[6] Reiterating the lingo of an adolescent boy, Schwebel's account repeatedly references sexual exploits that included the pursuit of a Mexican woman who temporarily worked as a maid for his family. The author justifies this behavior to his readers by declaring that the woman later ended up as a prostitute. In order to describe efforts to become a "normal" American teenager, Ascher also briefly includes some of her early dates. In line with 1950s U.S. gender conventions, the author depicts her former self as passive and innocently accompanying a girlfriend on a double date with two Navy cadets. While also reifying gender stereotypes—albeit female ones—Ascher's selections and portrayals differ most noticeably from those of Schwebel's narrative.

In composing their accounts, the authors relied on more than simply recollections of the experience of exile. Instead, their works draw on a remarkably broad source base. Schwebel's book includes and reproduces key immigration documents and an array of family pictures that represent lost and rebuilt communities. It is unfortunate that the publisher did not always succeed in carefully resizing and cropping these images, which are, as a result, somewhat distorted. Spiel's account substantially draws on personal letters and pocket calendars that served as a diary for much of her career as a writer. Hartman's book incorporates a broad array of works in literary criticism along with reflections on autobiography by other scholars such as Jacques Derrida, who informed his own writing. Ascher's memoir, finally, even relies on work at various Viennese research institutes, including the archives of the city's Jewish community and the Austrian resistance movement. It also includes material from interviews with relatives of her father's deceased fellow psychoanalysts.

As Geoffrey Hartman reminds his readers, memoirs are "scraps and scribbles about the inner life ... responses to family relations, ... debates, [and] travels" (Hartman, p. 159). They—by necessity—omit much and present distinct pictures of what the authors wished to share about their lives at the time they composed their accounts. In this sense, the four memoirists accomplished what they set out to do. Their texts, however, are hardly transparent and direct windows on the past "as it really was." They require—quoting Hartman again—"studying, theory, and contemplation" (Hartman, p. 113). Subjected to this ap-

proach, these exile memoirs are invaluable sources that add rich descriptions and insights about struggles over belonging and displacement in ways that conventional historiography cannot achieve. They capture what Saul Friedländer described as the "mythic memory" of the victims in his memorable exchange with Martin Broszat in the late 1980s.[7] Schwebel's claim to express views and emotions shared by most exiles notwithstanding, the memoirs by these four eloquent and successful middle-class authors are hardly representative of the multitude of experiences of the more than 340,000 German and Austrian Jewish refugees from central Europe. While of highly differing quality and ambition, the four autobiographical texts still forcefully demonstrate how the experience of exile shaped the authors and their family members' subsequent lives and work. Trauma, memory, and the heritage of refugees continued, as convincingly conveyed by Ascher, to shape the lives of members of the second generation. Escape from Hitler's Europe hardly brought full relief.

#### Notes

[1]. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 97.

[2]. See, for instance, Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Flight from the Reich: Refugee Jews, 1939-1946* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

[3]. For two examples, see Primo Levi, *Survival at Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone, 1996); and Faye Schulman, *A Partisan's Memoir* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995).

[4]. Hilde Spiel, *Die hellen und die finsternen Zeiten* (Munich: List Verlag, 1989), and *Welche Welt ist meine Welt* (Munich: List Verlag, 1990).

[5]. See, for example, Aaron Hass, *The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[6]. Pascale Rachel Bos, "Women and the Holocaust: Analyzing Gender Difference," in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, ed. Neil Levi and Michel Rothberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 183.

[7]. Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, "A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism," *New German Critique* 44 (1988): 94-95.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Thomas Pegelow Kaplan. Review of Ascher, Carol, *Afterimages: A Family Memoir* and Hartman, Geoffrey H., *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* and Schwebel, Bruno, *As Luck Would Have It: My Exile in France and Mexico: Recollections and Stories* and Spiel, Hilde, *The Dark and the Bright: Memoirs 1911-1989*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24786>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.