



David G. Roskies, Naomi Diamant. *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide.* Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012. 368 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61168-357-8; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61168-358-5.

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Recouping the Roots and Branches of Holocaust Literature

David G. Roskies and Naomi Diamant's ambitious and truly useful book, a history and also a reader's guide suitable for serious readers and scholars alike, subdivides Holocaust literature, from across the world and in a dozen original languages, into four coherent periods spanning 1938 to the present. In their introductory chapter, the authors rightfully claim that "this is the first attempt at a periodization of Holocaust literature worldwide" (p. 8). Furthermore, they assert that a chronological presentation is superior to the encyclopedic approach adopted in S. Lillian Kremer's *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work* (2002), because "no one reads a literature in alphabetical order" (p. 6). Of course, few readers encounter Holocaust literature in chronological order, either. The real advantage of Roskies and Diamant's linear narrative is that it offers a thorough contextualization for all texts discussed, and it includes, in a few sentences or a paragraph, lesser-known authors who might not merit an encyclopedia entry of their own but still have an important place in this story. The volume is especially strong in its coverage of Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and Hebrew texts, many of which have been translated into English only in the last twenty years.

Offering an unusually rich account of wartime writing, including diaries, sophisticated literary works, and a wide array of journalism, Roskies and Diamant supplement their chronological structure with an important geographical distinction: chapter 2 concentrates on the

"Free Zone," both to the west and to the east, while chapter 3 discusses occupied Europe, what the authors call the "Jew-Zone," a provocative term meant to remind us that the desperate texts produced inside were fundamentally different from the literature of the "Free Zone." Particularly interesting here is the account of ghetto reportage, and of "the confessional diary," a sub-genre born in late 1943, by which time the majority of the killing was complete. These traumatized "diarists" have a terrible secret to confess, forcing them to backtrack to the time of the slaughter. However irrational, they blame themselves for being absent when the round-up occurred.... To write, from that moment on, was "to work through overwhelming loss and a crushing burden of guilt" (p. 69).

Chapter 4 covers thoroughly the period from 1945 to 1960, designated by Roskies and Diamant the literature of "communal memory," in which the majority of the responses to the events, mainly written in Yiddish, gestated within the Jewish community. As displaced refugees produced numerous *yizkor* books to commemorate the destroyed Jewish towns of Eastern Europe, the Yiddish press in far-flung corners of the world published great quantities of *khurban-literatur*, "true tales of the ghettos and camps" that "adopted fictional and journalistic techniques to make their stories not only more readable but also more relevant" (p. 105). While important texts were produced in Polish immediately after the war by non-Jews like Tadeusz Borowski—whose work is dis-

cussed intelligently here—the rising domination of the Soviet Union preempted a fuller reckoning of the events. Roskies and Diamant note that Holocaust memoirs published at this time in French and Italian tended to universalize the victims—they were men rather than Jews—and that, after the Vichy and Italian Fascist collaborations with Germany, Western Europeans found that “the surest way to forge a new national identity in the wake of such trauma, in Italy and elsewhere, was to ignore and forget [the Holocaust]” (p. 111).

The authors label the period from 1960 to 1985, the subject of chapter 5, “provisional memory,” which “was marked by the first aggressive attempts to reach beyond the borders of country, language, religion, political affiliation, and genealogy” (p. 12), that is, to an international audience. The conventional wisdom is that the 1961 Eichmann trial contributed substantially to a bringing the Holocaust to a broader, global consciousness for the first time. While Roskies and Diamant do not effectively dispute this, they argue that the literary history of the Holocaust has also been, from generation to generation, a history of forgetting. Just as the wartime writing languished in obscurity in the fifteen years after the war, in the “provisional” period the guardians of Holocaust memory seemed to forget about the literary outpouring of the postwar years. “For Holocaust literature to speak anew, every generation of [writers] had to see itself as the first bear witness and to feel profoundly scandalized by presumed silence of those who came before” (p. 126). Thus, in 1972, Elie Wiesel asserted that only “one generation after” the events could a true response be formulated. This generation wrote “novels of survival,” like Piotr Rawicz’s *Blood from the Sky* (2003), and Bogdan Wojdowski’s less well-known *Bread for the Departed* (1997). Tales of so-called ugly survivors, studies of alienation and trauma, were written by the likes of Cynthia Ozick, Aharon Appelfeld, and many others.

Chapter 6 covers 1985 to the present, what Roskies and Diamant call “authorized memory.” “English, merely a mediator until now, became the authorized language of

Holocaust memory,” the authors conclude. “This marked a fundamental shift from the languages in which the Holocaust was lived to the languages in which it was re-lived” (p. 157). Among many topics and texts discussed is an interesting section on works by writers such as Louis Begley and Sarah Kofman who survived the Holocaust as children hiding or passing as gentiles. “For them, the events were more limited, more fragmented, and inevitably more filtered through a screen of psychological defenses” (p. 176). A similar type of text, but a fabricated one, is Binjamin Wilkomirski’s autobiographical *Fragments* (1996). Roskies and Diamant categorize this work as an “unauthorized” representation of the Holocaust that violated a sacred trust owed to readers.

The book’s final section is a 125-page guide to one hundred significant books in the history of Holocaust literature. Emphasizing chronology again, above genre or language of composition or even Holocaust geography, the books are presented in the order in which they were written. Since each work offers up diverse questions to consider and different narrative perspectives, the structure of each entry is distinct. Finally, this book also contains twenty black and white images as well as eight color plates illustrating the covers of significant books in Holocaust literature. These images “mimic the movement from communal to provisional to authorized memory of the Holocaust,” the authors argue, thereby confirming the volume’s organizing principles (p. 181).

This book will be a standard reference work for years to come. Roskies and Diamant have succeeded in writing a remarkably comprehensive yet concise history of Holocaust literature, as they have defined it, which recoups its roots and branches in a multitude of languages. Holocaust literature, broadly defined, is vast. Consequently, it is not unexpected that the authors left out transgressive works like Jonathan Littell’s novel *The Kindly Ones* (2009). However, the absence of Ruth KlÄ¼ger’s canonical memoir, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (2001), is somewhat surprising.

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