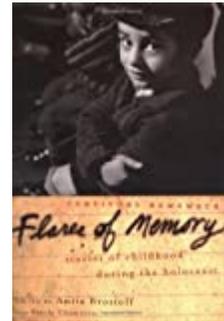


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Anita Brostoff, Sheila Chamovitz, eds.** *Flares of Memory: Stories of Childhood during the Holocaust.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 384 pp. \$22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-513871-9.



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Normally, anyone offered a chance to read the results of an adult writing class in Pittsburgh might choose instead to go back to the library for another browse. On the basis of mundane content alone, not to mention writing style, the likelihood of finding gripping prose from “amateur” writers taking an adult course might seem very low indeed. The students assembled by Anita Brostoff, however, make for an exception. Based upon content alone, these amateur writers have stories which grip the reader and linger in the mind. Furthermore, in almost all cases, these stories are told with a non-intrusive craft well suited to the material.

Sheila Chamovitz, a documentary filmmaker, first imagined this project. Listening to a friend dredge up long-buried stories from her Holocaust childhood, Chamovitz came to the conclusion that child survivors have unique stories to tell and that autobiographical writing would allow them to tell and control their stories most fully, with no filmmaker determining the final shape and no interviewer recording a one time, “first draft” version. Anita Brostoff, who taught writing at Carnegie-Mellon and now works as a writing and communications consultant, stepped in to develop a series of writing workshops. The result is a book in which forty-two survivors contribute more than one hundred narratives, most of them crafted in the setting of the writing

workshops.

Autobiographical writing about the Holocaust is hardly new. Elie Wiesel is only the most prominent of many who survived Nazi butchery determined to tell the world what had happened. We also have many survivors increasingly speaking out in schools and other public venues, also willing to tell their story, even at the cost of constantly returning to painful memories. Finally, Steven Spielbergs survivor testimony project is one of many seeking to secure on audio or videotape a record for future generations.

In the midst of this proliferation, it is no simple thing to know how best to tell the story. Accuracy is one issue. Only those with perverse motives (i.e., Holocaust deniers) seek out inaccuracies in an effort to dismiss Holocaust testimony as a whole; however, all historians feel more comfortable when corroborating testimony and/or other forms of evidence can be added to the mix. There is also a complex relationship between form and content. Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* has argued that the line between a memoir and a novel is very thin indeed, and that the very act of shaping prose must to a certain extent be at odds with stark description. Focusing on the Holocaust, Lawrence Langer thinks we all suffer from an almost inevitable need to find courage and victory and meaning in the testimony of survivors, when

their stories are really about horror and loss. In his view the true horror can never be understood, even approximately, when we shape it with our emotional needs and values. As Sid Bolkowsky and Henry Greenberg have both argued, the Steven Spielberg survivor interviews are especially prone to a shape determined in advance. Finally, as suggested by Jan Gross, survivor testimony can only tell the least horrifying part of the story, at least if we assume that dying a horrible death (the fate of most Jews) was worse than surviving harsh experience (the fate of survivors).

Alongside these complex issues about survivor testimony, we also have historical issues about how to analyze and interpret the Holocaust, how to place it in history, how to assess motivation and determine responsibility. Brostoff and Chamovitz wisely sidestep these issues for the most part. However, Brostoff notes, for example, that this book “is for people who have been taught incorrectly, having learned in school, for instance, that there was *something* good about Adolf Hitler” (p. xxxviii).

Would it not be better to state this alternatively, that whatever good one might find in Hitler—his eye for view property near Berchtesgaden or the fact that employment went up with his plans for militarization—could not justify supporting him politically and should not moderate ones condemnation, given the brutality and criminality of his overall policies? Brostoff also gets into the issue of survivor reliability, claiming for her writers that, although facts might not always be accurate, “the *impression* of an event upon the memory and the psyche of the victim must be seen as reliable.” She then goes on, “That is, the stories achieve a fundamental truth: the essence of the experience, its meaning, is absolutely true.” And finally, “Through writing about these events, these writers have recorded . . . profound and true evidence about the Holocaust.” (All quotes from p. xxxvii, with emphasis in the original).

These claims of fundamental truth, absolute truth, and profound truth, seem to reach too far. One can imagine the quibbles arising in an academic seminar or at a conference. The claims also seem unnecessary. It is better, almost certainly, to let the stories speak for themselves. They reveal a mosaic of experiences during the Holocaust which are very human, very convincing, and very complex. Consider for example the story of Sara Reichman, a Jewish girl born in the Ukraine in 1942. She describes how her father fled to Russia prior to her birth and her mother, unable to protect the child, gave her up

at six months to be hidden by a Polish family. In 1947 her mother's sister arrived to take her back. The shock of being taken from her Polish family was followed by hearing the grim news that her mother had been shot and killed while hiding in a cave. She and her aunt eventually got to a DP camp in Austria, where she met the father who had spent most of those years in prison. Finally they moved to Israel. Reichman concludes this narrative by describing her fond memories of the Polish family with whom she lived. There she had parents, siblings, grandparents, family celebrations, religious ceremonies, a feeling of being loved, altogether a harmony hard to reproduce in a postwar Jewish family decimated by death. “It is the theme of my life to recreate that wholeness” (p. 120).

We also hear from Shulamit Bastacky, born in Lithuania in August 1941, four weeks after the Germans arrived. With the help of a nun she hid in a cellar by herself for more than three years. When Russians were about to arrive, the nun placed her on a riverbank to be found. This led to a Catholic orphanage and a Lithuanian name, until her parents, having survived themselves, miraculously found their daughter by recognizing a birthmark. Even if this might be considered a “success story” at first glance, it does not keep Bastacky from concluding on a low note: “The feelings of a lost early childhood will remain with me the rest of my life” (p. 122). (Those who have seen the film *Kindertransport* will not be surprised by stories of complex response from child survivors.)

Most of the stories in this book involve older children or even young adults. They recount the loss of parents and siblings, the viewing of brutality and murder, the pain of hunger and deprivation: a cross section of the experiences we know to be part of the Holocaust, but with a very human and personalized telling. Some of the stories seem amazing: young men escaping against all odds to fight with partisans; a young woman learning to live as a Polish peasant, milking cows successfully even though she had first approached a bull and gotten a solid kick; even a fifteen-year-old girl telling of a toddler crying on the doorstep of her camp barrack, taken in by the women and protected for two and one-half years until he walked out with them at liberation. Except for the absence of “winning a tank,” this could almost be the story line of *Life is Beautiful*. As surprising as these stories might be, in their diversity they help illustrate something we already know about the Holocaust. With the millions of people involved, almost everything happened at least once.

One unmistakable theme in the narratives involves the brutality of bystanders, especially in eastern Europe, echoing issues raised recently by Jan Gross in *Neighbors*. Cyna Glatstein tells us that the Germans who arrived in her Polish village in 1939 took her father and brother and other Jewish men to the marketplace and began to humiliate and terrorize them. She adds, however, that “[t]he Poles, who had congregated, applauded. They jeered, they mocked and laughed hilariously” (p. 32). She also tells a later story of a Jewish farm worker, passing as a Christian, who was forced by Polish farm workers to pull down his pants. As soon as they had their proof, “they hacked him to pieces and threw his remains into a pit” (p. 110). Leon Brett, who fled his Lithuanian village in 1941, learned from a friend how locals “immediately had begun to terrorize the Jews” (p. 40). After liberation he went back, only to discover that a mere six of one thousand Jews apparently had survived, and Lithuanians now lived in all the formerly Jewish houses. Leon Brett himself escaped only as far as another village in that summer of 1941. He and his cousin were then arrested by Lithuanians and spent the summer in a jail so brutal that they hoped for a German officer to arrive, perhaps even to apologize. Then one day it happened. The German really did apologize and blamed the “primitive” Lithuanians for bad conditions. This politeness, of course, led only to an invitation for volunteers to go work on a farm: a ruse that was, if less primitive, no less lethal (pp. 65-66).

Romanians also take their place of infamy in these stories of human violence. Robin Udlar describes in grim detail the fate of sixteen family members and then adds, “The world still does not comprehend, it seems, what happened to these people. Contrary to what some current politicians say, the Romanian fascists were no more ‘humane’ than the German fascists. >From June 22, 1941, until May 1942, the Romanians tried methodically, without mercy, day after day, in every village, in every city of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria, to annihilate the Jews” (p. 278).

Other local people were helpful, of course, and this book does tell positive stories of individuals risking their lives to hide or rescue Jews. It is always hard to generalize, however. For example, Moshe Baran tells of the “farmer Kowarski,” who spirited first Baran’s brother and sister and then his mother out of the Krasny ghetto,

the latter just two days before the ghetto was liquidated. Kowarski also smuggled weapons to partisans and was “known to be reliable.” After 1945, however, Baran learned that one group of Jewish boys, wanting to join the Polish partisans, had been set up and murdered for their weapons at Kowarski’s instigation. Not only that, he had served as a German agent as well, a double or triple agent from whom Baran, of course, really had benefited (pp. 185-86).

Leon Brett tells of a Lithuanian named Jurgis, a rough, brawling man, who parlayed his skills at homemade liquor into a good relationship with a German camp commander. Although most people feared and few liked Jurgis, Brett, assigned to assist him, discovered that this rough peasant treated him as a human being, sharing food (“a slice for me, a slice for you”) and calling him by his given name. The friendly relationship grew, with Jurgis supplying guns to the Jewish underground in the camp and finally assisting Brett in his escape to a group of Jewish partisans. When Brett came back after the war to seek out his protector, he was told, “You mean the moonshiner? Oh, he is dead [...]. Somebody killed him. Who cares, nobody liked him” (p. 198).

In these stories we also meet nice Germans, and we meet nasty Germans who could be inexplicably nice at a given moment. One of the chapters organized by Brostoff and Chamovitz, “The Lottery of Death and Life,” illustrates convincingly the overwhelming role of chance in the fate of any Jew subject to Nazi tyranny. There was never a right response, a correct decision. Sometimes a decision, whether to run or stop, whether to confess or hide, produced a good result. Most often, for most Jews, any choice resulted only in more brutality. Amidst all the uncertainties and improbabilities, the narratives in this book provide personal, convincing, and complex evidence for two conclusions, neither of which is new. Germans instigated the mayhem, whether supported by locals or not; and Jews suffered, whether they survived or not.

Brostoff and Chamovitz are to be commended for organizing this book, including a timeline and the additional stories of four American liberators, and the authors are to be commended for their willingness to contribute their part to the mosaic of Holocaust studies.

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