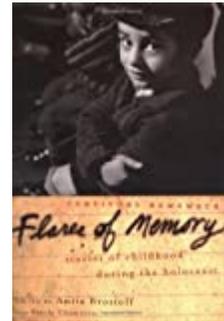




Anita Brostoff, Sheila Chamovitz, eds. *Flares of Memory: Stories of Childhood during the Holocaust*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 384 pp. \$22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-513871-9.



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History and Holocaust Testimony

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What is the primary function of Holocaust testimony? Is it to expand our knowledge of the Holocaust? Or, as the Holocaust historian Annette Wieviorka has argued, has the function of testimony changed in recent decades to become a way of keeping the Holocaust “before our eyes,” rather than a means of uncovering little-known aspects of the Nazi genocide of the Jews?[1] *Flares of Memory: Stories of Childhood during the Holocaust* is part of the trend that Wieviorka has identified.

As a collection of more than one hundred stories written by some forty Jewish survivors of the Holocaust from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Greece, *Flares of Memory* does not purport to present factually accurate narratives, or a “verifiable history,” in the words of Anita Brostoff, the collection’s lead editor (p. xxxvii). Instead, the stories included in the volume reveal “the *impression* of an event upon the memory and the psyche of the victim [which] must be seen as reliable” (p. xxxvii). *Flares of Memory* seeks to convey the emotional impact that the Holocaust had on Jews who were children

or young adults during the late 1930s and the war years. The book thus aims to further our understanding of the Holocaust—to be “an educational agent”—by opening up a space for empathy with its young victims (p. xxxviii). In so doing, *Flares of Memory* does manage to keep the Holocaust “before our eyes.”

The stories are indeed painful and often moving. They depict a broad spectrum of Jews’ experiences from different parts of Nazi-occupied Europe, including life in ghettos, in hiding, in concentration camps, and in partisan encampments, as well as the experiences of Jews who passed as Christians. The stories also cover a wide time frame. Although most of them treat the war years, a handful describe Jewish life in Germany, Poland, and Lithuania in the years before the outbreak of World War II, and the last fifth of the book contains stories about liberation and lifelong coping with the trauma of the Holocaust. The book also has an addendum with six stories by American soldiers and a nurse about their first impressions of the concentration and forced labor camps during the period of Liberation. There is an interesting background to how many of the stories in *Flares of*

Memory came to be written. More than half of the authors attended a series of writing workshops for Holocaust survivors at the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh, which were conducted mainly by Brostoff. Thus, the majority of the stories are products of those workshops in which survivors were taught “standard literary conventions” and were instructed to write about a single experience of any sort, positive or negative (p. xxxiv). Other stories appearing in the collection are excerpts from survivors’ previously written memoirs. Overall, the stories range in length from one-half to seventeen pages, with an average length of one and three pages. With such diversity, *Flares of Memory* certainly does represent a wide range of Holocaust experiences, reminding its readers of the tremendous reach of the Nazis’ genocidal activities. Sometimes, however, such diversity can be more confusing than enlightening. The editors tend to let the stories speak for themselves, providing little annotation.

Given the sheer number of stories contained in *Flares of Memory*, it is impossible to do justice to the vast majority of them. Perhaps the two most significant contributions of the collection are stories depicting Jewish experiences in small towns and rural areas, and stories that convey the perspective of being a child or a youth during the Holocaust. In both cases, such experiences have been little represented in Holocaust literature, whether historical or testimonial, and for this reason, these stories are of historical as well as human interest. Leon Brett’s four stories are among the strongest in the collection. They are richly detailed and complex portraits of prewar and wartime Jewish life in and around the Lithuanian shtetl Skudvil (also known as Shkudvil or, in Lithuanian, as Skaudvile). His story, “War Arrives in Lithuania,” is a vivid recollection of the Jewish world that was destroyed, replete with descriptions of thrice daily prayers at the *shul* where his father was rabbi, of everyday debates about Talmudic law and international politics, and of gatherings at the lending library in the Krom family’s home where lemonade and pastries, poetry reading and singing along to phonograph records made Thursday nights a treat. In “War Arrives in Lithuania,” as well as in “What Ever Happened to the Jews of Skudvil?” and “Lithuanian Friends,” Brett indicates both the overwhelming sense of betrayal, and rare instances of goodwill that characterized Jewish-Lithuanian relations. Brett expresses his rage at the Lithuanians who helped to murder his family and community, immediately taking over their houses, but he also mentions a few Lithuanians who never betrayed his trust, including one of whom was instrumental in his establishing contact sometime after

1941 with one of the sole Jewish survivors of Skudvil. In that meeting, he learned the details of the murder of his father, sister, and the other members of his community. Later that night, still under the cover of darkness, he and his Lithuanian companion, Praniukas, paid a visit to his hometown. As he stood “deep in thought” in the center of Skudvil, “[t]he destruction of my community was real. What did not seem real was that I was still living” (p. 41).

Stories by Rubin Udler and Cyna Glatstein describe their wartime experiences in rural areas of Ukraine, Poland, and Germany. Udler’s “Horrors of War” is unusual for its description of a ghetto that consisted of twenty-seven people living in a “squalid building previously used to house calves” in the Southwestern Ukrainian hamlet named Vinogradniy Sad, or “Vine Garden” (p. 76). “The irony of this name never failed to ring in our ears, even years afterward,” commented Udler (p. 75). Romanian Jews who had fled first to Bessarabia in July 1940 and then to Odessa in July 1941, before they were seized by Romanians and eventually transported to the ghetto in the Vine Garden, Udler, his father, mother, and sister worked as slave laborers under Romanian gendarmes from 1942 until 1944. In addition to offering a rare glimpse of a rural ghetto, “Horrors of War” contains a description of being robbed by “German colonists,” or *Volksdeutsche*, during their horrific forced march through a corpse-strewn, frozen landscape between Berezovka and Domanyevka in Southwestern Ukraine. The Germans took the clothing off their backs and the shoes from many of their feet, leaving them even more destitute than they had been already.

Cyna Glatstein worked on farms in Poland and Germany, not in the context of a rural ghetto, but by passing as a Polish Christian girl. Perpetually in danger of being exposed as a Jew, she sometimes avoided detection because of luck and other times because of her quick wittedness. Glatstein’s “In Constant Terror,” is a tale of her experiences passing as a Pole after having escaped from the Warsaw ghetto. Her second essay, “Unsung Heroes,” is about young children in the Warsaw ghetto who helped save their families by acting as lookouts and smugglers. Both essays focus attention on the unusual roles that were thrust upon some children during the Holocaust. Yet Glatstein’s “In Constant Terror” is remarkable as much for the narrator’s point of view as for its content. In this series of vignettes, Glatstein alternates between the voice of the young teenager that she was (Glatstein was born in 1928) and the adult that she is. The combination of contemporaneous and retrospective perspectives creates space for empathy as well as distance

for mourning and moral questioning.

With such wide-ranging materials, the editors of this collection undoubtedly struggled to find the best means of grouping the stories. They divided the stories among chapters that are meant to “illuminate crucial themes in Holocaust history: German actions intended to destroy Jewish life and society; the ruthless efficiency of the German system to achieve the Final Solution; the roles of chance and luck, hiding, family support, rescuers, and resistance efforts; the joy and suffering of survivors who were liberated; and the mixed emotions of survivors as they ponder the Holocaust in its aftermath” (pp. xxxvii-xxxviii). Their thematic groupings have yielded mixed results. Chapters organized around a particular period of time or wartime experience, such as liberation or resistance, are more cohesive than chapters organized around analytic categories, such as “Ruthlessness as a System” or “The Virtuous and the Vicious.” On the one hand, as Brostoff suggests, the variety of stories in any given chapter reflects both the diversity of European Jewry and of Jewish Holocaust experiences, underscoring that the Holocaust was not a single process that was replicated throughout Europe in exactly the same form, affecting a homogeneous mass of people. Indeed, the writers’ tendency to focus their stories around single incidents reinforces the sense of diversity while simultaneously replicating the impressionistic quality of childhood memory, in which so often gaps remain unfilled and connective threads unspun. On the other hand, precisely because most of the stories avoid recounting broader biographical or historical narratives, the organization and contextualization of the stories is all the more crucial if “the whole is [to be] greater than the sum of the parts,” as Brostoff intends the collection to be (p. xxxviii). Chapter introductions providing more detailed historical overviews, literary analyses, or biographical information about the writers would have greatly enhanced the collection as a whole. As they are, the chapter introductions do little to enhance or frame the stories.

By the same token, in lieu of an introduction that provides an historical overview of the Holocaust, the editors compiled a thirteen-page timeline, which incorporates each of the book’s stories as an entry on the timeline. Perhaps they felt that writing an overview was unnecessary or impossible given the wide range of places and experiences described in the stories. Instead, by means of the timeline, they have attempted to impart a sense of the broader context for each individual’s story. Nevertheless, timelines, like historical narratives, must include certain events and omit others, and in the case of this timeline,

the criteria for inclusion are murky, at best. Why include the establishment of the Gestapo and the May 1933 abolition of trade unions in Nazi Germany but omit the Reichstag fire, the Enabling Act, the 1 April 1933 Jewish boycott, and the 7 April 1933 Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service? In a couple of instances, the timeline entries contain errors (e.g., the famous letter signed by Goering giving Heydrich responsibility to prepare the “overall solution of the Jewish question” was dated 31 July 1941, not 21 July 1941). In other instances, the entries create false impressions (e.g., an entry of 21-25 July 1944 mentions the raiding of U.G.I.F.-run children’s homes in France and that “300 Jewish children, in addition to adult staff, are sent to Drancy and from there to Auschwitz” (p. xxiv); however, since it is the only entry on this subject, it mistakenly implies that over the course of the war a total of 300 children were sent from France to Auschwitz, when more than 6,000 children under the age of 13 were among the French victims).[2] Ultimately, because of the unsystematic criteria for selecting events as well as the imprecise language of its entries, the timeline creates more issues than it resolves.

To Brostoff’s credit, she and Sheila Chamowitz have assembled—and in many cases, played a role in generating—fascinating stories by child survivors of the Holocaust, whose experiences have, indeed, been underrepresented in Holocaust literature. Yet by establishing the goal, in a book about children’s experiences during the Holocaust, to evoke emotions or to uncover the deeper meaning of what it was like to be a victim of the Holocaust, Brostoff retraces a well-trodden path.[3] Children’s diaries and memoirs are rarely accorded the same historical importance as adult diaries and memoirs. Nonetheless, children’s experiences are also of historical importance. While it is ethically and pedagogically valuable to keep the Holocaust “before our eyes,” as the editors of *Flares of Memory* succeed in doing, they have unnecessarily diminished the contribution that such stories could make to our historical understanding of the Holocaust.

Notes:

[1]. Annette Wiewiorka, “On Testimony,” in *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), p. 24.

[2]. David Weinberg, “France,” in *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. Walter Laqueur (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 219.

[3]. On this point, see Alexandra Zapruder, “Intro-

duction,” to *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers’ Diaries of the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 10-11.

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