

*After the Holocaust. Challenging the Myth of Silence*, ed. by David Cesarani, Eric J. Sundquist (London and New York: Routledge 2012), pp. 228

by *Regula Ludi*

Not too long ago it was the conventional wisdom among historians that there had been a period of silence regarding the Holocaust in the immediate post-war period. According to this widely held belief survivors, too absorbed by rebuilding their lives and starting new families, preferred to remain silent, while the bigger public turned a deaf ear on those who would have been willing to recount their horrific experiences. In recent years, however, new research has questioned that “orthodoxy” (David Cesarani) by uncovering a stunning variety of responses to the Holocaust in the 1940s and 1950s. This essay collection brings together some of these new findings. Concentrating on such different activities as collecting survivor testimony, early Hollywood productions, the preservation of records, historical research, and theatre performances in DP camps, the authors draw a fascinating picture of a rich and vivid post-war culture of remembrance.

In his survey of early responses to the Jewish catastrophe, David Cesarani shows that the first efforts to document Nazi atrocities and secure records often originated in survivors’ striving for restitution and retribution. Many of these initiatives started before liberation. At the end of the war, they quickly expanded, driven by what survivors understood as the imperative to document, and soon grew into hotbeds of research and memorialisation. The French *Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine* provides a striking example. In her chapter, Laura Jokusch points to its key position in the struggle of Jews in France and their ambition to find their place in the republican cult of memory. The centre quickly developed a comprehensive programme which included a series of publications on Vichy anti-Semitism, carried out under the constraints of post-war shortages, plans for a memorial and efforts to assimilate the Jewish experience to the dominant cult of memory. Yet the French example also testifies to the constraints of republican laicism which required that Holocaust victims be transformed into martyrs in the struggle for universal values in order to integrate their experience into the national master narrative.

Responses to the Holocaust in the Yiddish press, in contrast, were initially characterized by a much wider variety of literary forms. The chapters by Mark L. Smith and David G. Roskies place much emphasis on survivors’ creativity in finding new forms to express their experiences. This resulted in the invention of literary genres, for instance documentary fiction as “a species of new journalism” (David G. Roskies, 93). The huge literary productivity, including the work of historians, autobiographies, fiction, religious writing and poetry, testified to an intensive engagement with the past. For linguistic reasons, however, because only few of the Yiddish or Hebrew titles were made accessible to non-Jewish audiences through translations, most of these publications have long escaped scholarly attention. A similar case can be made for many of the theatre

productions in DP camps that Margarete Myers Feinstein covers in her chapter. Theatre performances often portrayed life and suffering during the Holocaust in a blunt and direct manner. In acting out traumatic experiences, re-enactment of the past “had a therapeutic value for the survivors’ recovery, aiding the integration of Holocaust experiences into the survivors’ life stories,” Feinstein emphasises (47). Centring on heroic action, resistance and self-sacrifice, many of the plays also helped to reinterpret the Holocaust from an experience of victimization into a narrative of Zionist self-assertion.

Among the most intriguing contributions to this volume are the two chapters dealing with the work of David Boder, an originally Latvian psychologist who taught at the Illinois Institute of Technology. In the summer of 1946, Boder travelled across Europe to interview over 100 DPs. Being just a tiny portion of the survivor testimony collected by various institutions and individuals in the late 1940s, Boder’s interviews were quite unique. For example, they were among the first survivor testimony to be audio recorded. In focusing on the reception of Boder’s interviews in the United States, Alan Rosen reconstructs the circumstances of the recordings and the work Boder invested into publicizing his findings. In her fascinating analysis of individual interviews, Rachel Deblinger documents memory in the making, “in a transitional period, between the events of the Holocaust and the moment when Holocaust memory became cemented into a well-known narrative.” (120) As a consequence, survivors’ statements still were relatively free from many of the taboos and constraints ruling later testimony and gave evidence of emotional responses. Interviewees did not shy away from voicing their anger, frustration and thirst for revenge; and there were also sporadic indications of acts of violence inflicted by survivors upon their tormentors.

With chapters documenting the significance of Holocaust memory for sociological research, the impact of the Jewish catastrophe on theological reflection, representations of Nazi criminals in Hollywood films and American Jewish name changing, the volume includes a wide range of additional evidence questioning the myth of silence. As Beth B. Cohen argues in her contribution on DPs admitted to the United States, many survivors were eager to talk about their past and they did so among fellow survivors but, as they later recalled, did not find a receptive audience with American relatives and social workers. Such findings eventually raise questions about the actual significance of silence. What does “silence” exactly mean and what does the “myth of silence” refer to? Is it not talking about the horrific events, not finding the right words to express the “unspeakable?” Does it refer to the absence of a master narrative acceptable to the bigger public? Co-editor Eric J. Sundquist addresses some of these questions in his concluding reflections and makes an important point by stressing the dilemma of making sense of highly disturbing narratives with no interpretive framework at hand yet. “[I]t was not that the Holocaust had gone unmentioned or that the facts were unavailable,” he remarks, “but instead that their import remained elusive.” (210)

Yet this does not answer the question why “the myth of silence” emerged in the first place. An explanation is offered by Hasia R. Diner, who recounts how she felt

compelled to ask about the origins and the tenacity of obviously false recollections when being repeatedly confronted with disbelief on the part of American Jewish audiences despite the abundance of counter-evidence she produced. At some point the myth of silence had become so deeply rooted in American Jewish popular imagination, she observes, that it worked as the organizing principle of people's individual memories. Her reflections thus evolve into an intriguing case study about memory in collective contexts, while she finds the main source of the myth in the rebellion of the 1960s protest movement. Jewish students' allegation that their parents' generation had ignored the Holocaust or downplayed its significance underscored their criticism of their community establishment whom they charged with conciliatory and assimilationist attitudes in the early post-war period. Yet, with the members of the protest generation entering leadership positions in large numbers too, this claim solidified and became part of mainstream historiography and accordingly tightened its grip on Jewish communal culture.

With its rich new research, the volume offers a fresh approach to the post-war period and Jewish responses to the Holocaust. Yet, if there is one shortcoming to point out, the essay collection can be blamed for a certain U.S. centrism, which leaves the question unanswered whether the myth of silence was not in fact a specifically American way of framing Holocaust memory and as such part of a discourse that spilled over to Europe in the wake of second wave Holocaust restitution of the 1990s.

*Regula Ludi, University of Zurich*