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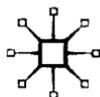
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GERMAN-JEWISH LITERATURE IN THE
WAKE OF THE HOLOCAUST

GRETE WEIL, RUTH KLÜGER, AND
THE POLITICS OF ADDRESS

PASCALE R. BOS

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Ter nagedachtenis aan mijn opa
Jules (Juda) Isaac Erwteman (1911–1943) Auschwitz-Birkenau
en oma
Jetty (Henriëtte) Rozenberg (1912–1998) Amsterdam

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PREFACE

It is rarely noted how astounding it is that some Holocaust survivors came to write about their wartime experiences at all. Very few survivors who did write would publish their writing, yet, it is often overlooked how exceptional the existence of these publications is. How were these survivors able to tell their stories, to write about them, and to open themselves up in this fashion to the public? What did it take to be able to do so? How did they find an opening for themselves and their audience to be able to narrate this story? At the same time, we rarely acknowledge how strongly indebted those of us who were not there are to this literature in coming to any kind of understanding of what it was like then, there, in hell on earth. It has been sixty years, both the length of a lifetime and the blink of an eye removed from the present, but it is the reading of this literature that still provides one of the most profound confrontations with this reality, a brief glimpse of what it was like to encounter this kind of violence and to have to endure this kind of suffering.

The question of how and why survivors wrote, and what impact their literature had, for themselves, and within the cultures in which they published their narratives in not a common one. It is the kind of question that does not sound theoretically sophisticated, it is *messy*, seemingly, and somewhat taboo. It is the kind of question that does not get asked within literary studies because author's intent and the writing process are not supposed to matter, they are not relevant to our literary inquiry. What matters is *our* reading of this literature, and what we write on is precisely that: how *we* read this or that particular text. I have always found this premise somewhat disturbing, first while working within feminist studies, and more strongly even while working within Holocaust studies. How could we argue that it *never* matters who or what an author is, how and when they wrote their texts, in what circumstances, and with what aim? How can we argue that the literature is only relevant as text, and not as statements that serve social, political, and cultural functions out in the world as well?

In my years of working on Holocaust literature, I came to realize that these questions are always relevant to me, and perhaps more so because of my own background. This background, as it turns out, matters more than I was willing to explore for myself or admit to others. Yet, I have had to. As Kalí Tal suggests, cultural criticism is a self-conscious act, "one in which the critic acknowledges that her choice of subject has meaning, and that a choice of subject is itself open to interpretation."¹ That is, as cultural critics we "seek to establish a mode of discourse in which each person can first uncover and acknowledge his or her beliefs, and then test them, compare

them to the beliefs of others, understand their implications, and modify them to reflect a changing understanding of the world” (5). In putting myself out there as a critic it is necessary to be clear as to who I am, and how this background may matter.

As someone born in the mid-1960s who grew up in a family in Amsterdam, the Netherlands in which on my mother’s side almost everyone was hunted down and murdered by the Nazis, and in which there was such an overabundance of what I call “impossible” memories among the survivors, creating a palpable presence of absence, of what could not be said, thought, or otherwise touched upon, Holocaust literature provided for me an important window unto a historical reality that was at the same time also a family story that I did not otherwise have access to. Although I came to puzzle together the story of my family bit by bit over the years through pieces of conversation with my grandmother with whom I was quite close, much of what I wondered about constituted impossible questions, that is: questions with impossibly revolting answers. Instead, I sought to put some of my questions to rest by voraciously reading memoirs and autobiographical literature by survivors. Without being aware of it as a teenager, I gravitated to survivor stories that filled in the particular blanks of my family history. I read much on the experiences of Auschwitz (where my grandfather worked as a doctor in the sick barracks of Birkenau before being killed at age thirty-one), I read much on Dutch Jews, and on living in hiding.

Many of the family stories were too overwhelming, too painful to deal with and I wanted a long time to explore the specifics. What I did not dare imagine was my grandfather’s life and death in Birkenau (of illness, starvation, gas?), the train ride and arrival of both sets of great-grandparents to Birkenau and Sobibor respectively, and what awaited them there (swift industrial-style killing), the separation from her husband that my mother’s aunt endured in Auschwitz and her death together with her ten-year-old son in the gas chambers. I know of their last moments only because of Primo Levi, Gerhard Durlacher, Tadeusz Borowski, Ruth Klüger: other inmates who were selected to live (as slaves, briefly, the very few who made it through) and who witnessed these events, and were able and compelled to bear witness afterwards. Their literature does more than function as testimony in a historical sense for me: it confronts a reality that remained unspeakable in my family.

Then there were my other questions, less extreme, but equally impossible nevertheless: how did my mother and grandmother rebuild their postwar lives after such enormous losses? What psychological mechanisms did they and the Jewish community in which they returned devise to ward off or deny the reality of this all-encompassing loss? Were silence and (attempts at) forgetting the only possible way to move on? What had it meant for them to be “made into” a Jew as mostly strongly assimilated middle-class Jews? Was their ambivalent, complex sense of Jewishness after the war a direct result of this persecution?

The speech acts these Holocaust memoirs and novels represent for me are so significant as they embody the exact opposite of the silence in the family and culture in which I grew up. Not only did this literature give me some sense of what the answers to these questions would look like (if only I dared to ask them, and if only they could be answered), as an act that asserts survivors’ sense of self, their survival, and that

addresses those who had stood by (or even aided in) their persecution, I found this writing an incredibly powerful statement about agency.

Because I read this literature not primarily with the eyes of a scholar but as someone who comes from a family and a community of survivors in which silence rather than speech has been the norm, I have been particularly intrigued by this ability of some to speak of the Holocaust. Even if my questions would remain unanswered, I felt that they needed to be asked: what were the mechanisms through which these authors were able to write about what they had seen, what they had experienced? Why could they speak while so few others did? What compelled them to bear witness, to write, and to publish for a European audience that approached this history in general and Holocaust survivors specifically at best in a neutral and more often in an antagonistic fashion? From where did they find the strength to speak back to this world that had sought to annihilate them, and now wished to silence this story? What does it mean to speak up, to demand an audience, to appeal to an audience to engage with the most wrenching moral failure of recent Western history?

In part, I came to see these kinds of publications as reflecting the need for survivors' reintegration: a desire to find a bridge between what has happened to them during the years of persecution, the prewar past, and the present. For assimilated Jews in particular, the need to reconnect to a national community from which they had been excluded by force was important, for it was not the Jewish collective to which they felt most strongly tied and to which they could return to make sense of their experiences. In some cases, this literature indeed seemed to function precisely this way: the author's words were heeded, the literature was widely read within their national culture, remained in print over the years, and sometimes the survivor even continued to write and became a celebrated author in his or her own right. These cases, however, were rare. More often, this literature was not received enthusiastically, was not reprinted (or was never even published), and only became part of a more widely read genre when the Holocaust had finally transformed politically and culturally from a source of private Jewish grief to a foundation for new national and European self-understanding.² That is, not until the late 1980s, profoundly belated, four decades after the fact.

Considering these serious difficulties for survivors to find an audience in Europe more broadly, it were the cases of German and Austrian Holocaust literature that intrigued me especially. Seeking a kind of return and psychological and cultural reintegration and finding an audience was even more complicated for assimilated Jews in countries where the Nazis had come to power and found full support in the national community, such as Germany and Austria. To what kind of a community were German- or Austrian-Jewish survivors appealing with their works? What did such an appeal mean? It is this peculiar literature in which survivors address not just an audience of compatriots, but of compatriots who were also their persecutors, which for me has come to serve as the most complex yet paradigmatic case for coming to understand survivor literature's near impossible attempt at address more broadly. The possibility of speaking at all in a situation in which survivor authors needed to anticipate their audience's antagonism is quite astonishing. What did it take to come to appeal to such an audience? What did it mean to come to speak of this experience? How did

the audience respond, and what did this response mean to these authors? It is questions like these, which stem in part directly from my own experience of growing up in a family and a Jewish community of postwar Western European Jews dominated by silence, that led me to investigate the authors and the cultural history with which this study deals.

This book does not answer all these questions, and in the many years of working on it, I came to realize that one of the answers I initially had deemed most urgent turned out to be less relevant later on. Rather than the psychological explanation that I had been looking for, it were the texts themselves which came to compel me. Their richness, their forceful response to the particular cultural climate in which they were written, the complex strategies they employed in trying to engage and interpellate their audience intrigued me. I thus came to seek a fuller confrontation with what this literature is telling us, what kind of (speech) acts it represents, and the cultural impact it has had.

I wanted to explore what it means to “return” in writing, to assert one self after the annihilation of the Holocaust. What does the response of the German audience and the critics to this literature suggest about their willingness or their ability to confront this past throughout the past decades, from the mid-1940s to the mid-1990s? Were the 1980s, which are often seen as a pivotal moment in the cultural recognition of Jewish survivors’ trauma in Western Europe (and which I certainly personally experienced as an important break in terms of the public discourse on the Holocaust in the Netherlands), truly the decade that generated significant change upon which the debates of the 1990s simply expanded? This study represents a search for these answers.