

Ms. Kobrin, of the University of Minnesota, provides some results of her important research in a neglected area of Holocaust studies.

HOLOCAUST LITERATURE IN JUDEO-SPANISH, PORTUGUESE, AND SPANISH

An area of Holocaust studies that has been neglected encompasses literature in Judeo-Spanish, Portuguese, and Spanish. Why has this particular Holocaust literature gone unattended? The answer lies partly in the number of survivors speaking these languages. The dearth of works produced in these languages reflects this when compared to those in Yiddish, Hebrew, French, or English. Moreover, efforts to gain access to these materials involve gleaning libraries in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Latin America, and the United States. None of the works dealt with herein have appeared in English translation. Therefore they have remained inaccessible to our predominantly Ashkenazi American Jewish audience.

So often we assume that the Holocaust was an Ashkenazi experience.¹ Turning to the first of these languages, Judeo-Spanish, our perspective is altered. While more Ashkenazim lost their lives than Sephardim,² the center of Sephardic culture was devastated during the war. Two works are the legacy of this aftermath: Isaac Ben Rubi's *El sekreto del mudo*³ and *Zikhron Saloniki: Grandeza i Destruyicion de Yeruchalayim del Balkan*.⁴

Ben Rubi is not a survivor-as-writer, but he has chosen the genre of the novel to record the horror of Auschwitz inflicted on Salonikan Jewry and his family. The story centers on a mute inmate, Leon Errera of Salonika and an assimilated Jew, Robert Hasson of Paris. At first Hasson does not realize that he, too, is of Sephardic descent. His gentile wife learns of his heritage and obtains special nationality papers from the Spanish embassy that ultimately improve Robert's status in Auschwitz. Ben Rubi alludes here to a historical fact that, indeed, a small number of Sephardim held Spanish identity papers

when the Nazis entered Salonika. Their peculiar citizen status complicated their deportation, and some did escape extermination. In the imagined world of this novel, this improved status, bound up with the Sephardic heritage, saves another inmate. The narrative possesses the elements of a highly contrived plot that permits Ben Rubi to raise many issues of the Holocaust, such as assimilated Jewry, the role of Spain in rescuing Jews, resistance and revolt in Auschwitz, and the interaction between Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions.

Through the muteness of the protagonist, Ben Rubi creates a narrative voice that reveals the ordeal of Salonikan Jewry. The theme of muteness is not unique to Holocaust literature. Many personae have been verbally stifled, for example, Wiesel's Gregor in *Gates of the Forest* and Kaniuk's David in *Adam Resurrected*. The aphasic state often characterizes their alienation from humanity. However, Ben Rubi twists this expected norm; on the contrary, Leon's aphasia challenges him to seek all avenues in order to communicate. Never viewed lethargically, Leon perpetually scribbles notes to other inmates. His apparent "dumbness" acts as a sham, and the reader must delve into his mind to read his thoughts on camp life and his lost Salonika.

Ben Rubi's literary remembrances of Salonika are complemented by a slim communal history: *Zikhron Saloniki: Grandeza i Destruycion de Yeruchalayim del Balkan*. This text belongs to the most intimate nonfiction genre of the Holocaust—the memorial book. Of the dozens of memorial books commemorating Jewish enclaves wiped out by the Nazi atrocity, *Zikhron Saloniki* is appropriately written in Judeo-Spanish, immortalizing the linguistic remnant of former persecution, medieval Spanish, and the center of Sephardic culture. This *sefer zikaron* sketches the history of the community from its inception. Four chapters specifically deal with the Holocaust: "Anti-Semitism," "The Destruction of the Community by the Germans," "The Extermination in Auschwitz and in Birkenau," and "After the Catastrophe." Unlike Leon's nostalgia, the postwar Jewish leaders have recorded the bare sentiments of many survivors. When recounting the days leading up to the ghettoization and fatal deportation, the delicate issue of relations between Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions surfaces.

Dr. Sevi Koretz, an Ashkenazi rabbi, headed the Sephardic community during these traumatic times. The controversy over his conduct with the Nazis has been examined in several Holocaust histories.⁵ In *Zikhron Saloniki* the survivors of the community reflect on how Dr. Koretz obtained the post. The previous rabbi Haim

Haviv, had become overburdened with matters of halakhah. A split arose in the community to appoint a "modern" rabbi with an academic degree. Thus the last grand Rabbi of Salonika was a "modern" Ashkenazi rabbi. The Jewish masses of the city and the rabbi became estranged and in retrospect, the present communal leaders have noted this grave error on the part of the community council. Whether one can adequately assess the behavior of Jewish communal leaders during the Holocaust remains problematic; nevertheless, Salonika's already complex situation was further hampered by cultural insensitivity.

This disparity between Ashkenazi and Sephardi affected another area of the Holocaust: escape routes in relation to Spain. The manner in which Spain aided in the rescue of the Jews during the war is an example of this paradox. Two sets of Jewish refugees must be defined when speaking of Spain as a "haven." One group of Jews included those who, by claiming Sephardic ancestry, were able to obtain the protection of the Spanish government. In reality only 640 Hispanic Sephardim from Greece out of a total of 80,000 Jews were saved from the gas chambers because of these papers.⁶ This was the historical fact that Ben Rubi recast in *El sekreto del mudo*. The second group of Jews were basically Ashkenazim who fled to Spain from Nazi-occupied France by crossing the Pyrenees. Most often they were not turned back at the boarder. It has been suggested that the Ashkenazi refugees posed less of a threat to Catholic Spain because they did not share a similar cultural experience. They were not well versed in the language, and their chances of assimilating and staying on in Spain were negligible, whereas the Sephardim stirred up memories of the expulsion and Inquisition. Thus, Spain became a mere stopover for Jewish refugees hoping to gain passage to the Americas or Palestine.⁷

One such Ashkenazi survivor of the Pyrenees' trek is Simón Rubenstein. His personal narrative, *Sobrevivir*,⁸ draws from this flight. Born in Lublin, Rubenstein emigrated to Belgium and then France, where he was subsequently interned. After several unsuccessful attempts, he finally crossed into Spain. From Spain he went to Palestine,⁹ where he lived for a period of time before settling in Mexico City. His sojourn is so intricate that the reader is tempted to conclude that it is a well-contrived plot and not the author's empirical experience. His narrative similarly exemplifies the ironic intertwining threads of history. With the ousting of Jews from Iberia in the fifteenth century, generations later their coreligionists find themselves in another Spanish-Portuguese environment of the Americas joining up with the medieval literary tradition of Sephardic Jewry.

The second tale of survival, *E o mundo silenciou*¹⁰ by Ben Abraham, also falls within this context. The author depicts the shock of discovering his Jewishness. Unlike the traditional upbringing of Rubenstein, Ben Abraham was raised in an assimilated Ashkenazi home. With the outbreak of the war, and the arrival of German soldiers in Lodz, his world view widens drastically. Ben Abraham's father dies during the ghettoization. The boy's rites of passage are not a *bar mitsvah* but, instead, the preparing of his father's remains for proper burial. He quickly learns *kaddish*, and is no longer mute in terms of prayer. Ultimately, the deportation to Auschwitz takes place. His efforts turn to one thing—survival.

Motivated by this imperative not to forget, Ben Abraham moves from the realm of memoir to that of the novel. In *Desafio ao Destino*¹¹ he deals indirectly with the Holocaust, focusing on the odyssey of a pilot shot down over the Negev during the War of Independence. The protagonist is once again named Leon. Similarly, he is physically incapacitated, ensnared in the wrecked fuselage of his plane. The author flashes back to reconstruct his journey to Israel from the Lodz ghetto. Like the former texts, the complex labyrinth of the journey disorients the reader. This effectively reiterates the refugee's sense of being pursued and hunted.

This *leitmotif* of the journey reverberates in Stanislaw Szmajzner's *Inferno em Sobibor: A tragedia de um adolescente judeu*.¹² Szmajzner raises the critical problem facing the survivor-turned-writer of the Holocaust. How can one portray truths that are more fantastic and strange than fiction? What must happen to the notion of the literary imagination?¹³ From the outset he simply rejects the traditional concept of literature as the aesthetic object.

Of all the tragedies which have enveloped my people and my land, I can offer nothing to the reader which would transport him to the flowery gardens of Warsaw in search of a tender romance or to the domains of fiction where he would encounter fantasy and chimeras. This narration—cold and candid, devoid of all literary adornments that would make it more amenable—tells my story the truth of what happened to a boy of twelve. Even today, after so many, many years have passed, I often wonder if all this did, in fact, happen to me.¹⁴

Unlike Rubenstein, Ben Abraham, and Ben Rubi, Szmajzner is a total skeptic. At the age of 12, the author is uprooted from his traditional home. He witnesses his father, a pious Jew, beg for alms in the name of Jesus. What shame and despair this youth feels, seeing his father's deterioration force him to follow suit as another Aher, the paradigm of Jewish apostasy. God's existence has become a

moot/mute point. Having worked as a jeweler, his skill writes his ticket to survival in the camps. He ends up receiving other deportees' jewelry at the time of selection. He refashions it at the whim of the German officers.

Nevertheless, I became shocked by the appearance of this new material which until now had not come into my hands. The teeth contained bloodied fragments of gum, which made me deduce that they had been violently extracted only moments ago.¹⁵

Stooping lower than his apostate father, Szmajzner inhales the fumes of burning flesh as he melts down the gold fillings. The odor will haunt him forever. A violent need to resist further prostitution envelopes him. His decision coincides with other inmates' efforts to revolt. Szmajzner escapes to the surrounding forests, only to learn that it is not enough when his brother is murdered by Polish partisans. Szmajzner cautiously makes his way out, although he is never freed from thoughts of the Holocaust universe.

This *não-esquecimento*, or not forgetting, has been transformed into *Nunca Jamàs (Never Again)* . . . *Memorias de una sobreviviente de Auschwitz* by Duna Wasserstrom 1308.¹⁶ A journalist by trade Duna Wasserstrom has written a *sefer zikaron* for all of Jewry. This reportage is the most recent of her works and the first she has composed in Spanish. Wasserstrom is anything but mute or silent. On the contrary, it is literally her use of language that permitted her to survive and effect the survival of others. Quadrilingual—Russian by birth, French by nationality, German and Polish by academic studies—she spent 2 years in Birkenau and Auschwitz as an interpreter for the Gestapo. Her job permitted her to learn many things that the rest of the interns were unable to know or even imagine.

While working as interpreter, she often translated only things that would not endanger the life of an inmate. This was achieved by manipulating her voice, word choice, and mannerisms. Often she acted as if she were a ventriloquist, speaking to inmates without the Gestapo's awareness, comforting the witnesses through their ordeal.

Juxtaposed to this unique brand of resistance, Wasserstrom offers a glimpse of female camp life, rarely discussed by women survivors. The memoir consists of a series of scenes of inmates and their foes, many of her stoics are women. Wasserstrom sketches one instance, "*La madre y su bebé*" in which she records historical fact without precedent—a Jewess giving birth in Auschwitz. The norm in the camps was to send pregnant women directly to the gas chambers. The young Jewess goes into labor and gives birth to a son. The entire task

force of women in the camp mobilizes itself to prepare a layette for the child.

Spontaneously, without anyone agreeing, unanimously, the most extraordinary and generous women's movement of human solidarity that anyone could imagine came into being. . . . According to their know-how, they worked feverishly at night making bandages, baby clothes, sewing diapers, etc. stealing hours from such needed and short rest periods after each hard day's work.¹⁷

In the end all this has fostered false hope. Deceit and death were the Gestapo's intentions for keeping mother and son alive. They merely wanted to demonstrate to the International Red Cross Commission that life in Auschwitz proceeded as "normal."

The second portion of *Nunca Jamás* deals with the author's testimony in Frankfurt in 1964 against SS officers Broad and Boger. Her testimony was essential for their conviction. Wasserstrom witnessed SS Boger murder a small boy. The 4 year-old had just arrived at Auschwitz after the nightmare of deportation. The child had somehow managed to keep an apple with him. Boger killed the child and then ate the apple. The defense asked Wasserstrom why she had never written or spoken about this murder before in any of her books or articles.

"It was extremely difficult for me," I answered, "to write or speak about this because afterwards I was unable to look at children in the street without crying. I have seen many horrible things in Auschwitz but I have never been able to forget this. In addition this incident is linked to my private life."¹⁸

The private vision of her experience has now compelled her to speak publicly. Wasserstrom affirms in the end that no survivor was ever converted into doing evil after having daily suffered cruelty.

Wasserstrom's writings, along with those of Ben Rubi, Ben Abraham, Szmajzner, and Rubenstein, take the reader across geographic and linguistic barriers. From Salonika to Nazi Europe to Latin America, the journey's obsession finds expression in the common language of survival. The existence of these texts sheds light on the darkness of the Holocaust universe.

NOTES

1. See also M.Z. Frank, "The Sephardim of Salonica," *Congress Bi-Weekly*, 35, No. 2 January 22, 1968), 16.
2. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, "Estimated Number of Jews Killed in the Final Solution," *The War Against the Jews 1933-1945* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1975), p. 403.

3. Itzhak B. Ben Rubi, *El sekreto del mudo* (Tel Aviv: Lidor, 1953), pp. 1-311. (Judeo-Spanish); Itzhak B. Ben Rubi, *El sekreto del mudo Traducción y adaptación del Judeo-español de Eva Jardiel*. (Madrid, Spain: Copias Carmen Moreno c/de Murcia 26, 1 B. Madrid, 1966), pp. 1-303 (Spanish).
4. David A. Recanati, ed., *Zikron Saloniki: Grandeza i Destruyicion de Yeruchalayim del Balkan. El commitato por la Edition del Livro sovre la communita del Salonique*. (Tel Aviv: 5732).
5. Michael Molho and Joseph Nehama, *In Memoriam* (French), Vol. I. 1948. Vol. II, 1949. Hebrew edition. *Shoat Yehudey Yavan* (The Destruction of Greek Jewry) 1941-1944. (Yad Vashem: 1965; Nathan Eck, "New Light on the Charges Against the Last Chief Rabbi of Salonica." *Yad Vashem Bulletin*, No. 17 (December 1965), 9; Cecil Roth, "Greece: Can its Jews Survive?" *Congress Weekly*, (May 1947), 313.
6. Haim Avni, "Spanish Nationals in Greece and their Fate during the Holocaust" Jerusalem: Yad Vashem VIII (1970). p. 35-36.
7. See also Haim Avni, "La salvación de judíos por España durante la segund guerra mundial," *Actas del Primer Simposio de Estudios Sefariés* (Madrid, Spain: Instituto Arias Montano, 1970); Uri Oren, *A Town Called Monastir*. translated from the Hebrew by Mark Segal. (Tel Aviv: Dror Publications, 1971) 240 pp. A reference to the Spanish Nationals is made on p. 214; for a divergent view see Federico Ysart, *España y los judíos en la segunda guerra mundial* (Barcelona, Spain: Dopesa, 1973).
8. Simón Rubenstein, *Sobrevivir* (Mexico: Encuadernación libro mexicano, 1970).
9. Rubenstein traveled to Palestine aboard the Niassa. For a historical account demonstrating the Kafkaesque obstacles of the Holocaust journey, specifically dealing with this ship, see Perez Leshem (Fritz Lichtenstein), "Rescue Efforts in the Iberian Peninsula" *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute*, Vol. XIV (1969), pp. 231-256.
10. Ben Abraham, . . . *E o mundo silenciou* (Sao Paulo, Brazil: W.G. Comunicacoes Producoes, 1972).
11. Ben Abraham, *Desafio ao Destino* (Sao Paulo, Brazil: Global Editora e distribuidora Itda, 1974).
12. Stanislaw Szmajzner, *Inferno em Sobibor: A tragédia de um adolescente judeu* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Bloch Editores, 1968).
13. Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. (New Haven, Conn., and London, England: Yale University Press, 1975).
14. Szmajzner, op. cit. p. 24.
15. Ibid., p. 166.
16. Duna Wasserstrom, *Nunca Jamás Memorias de una sobreviviente de Auschwitz* (Mexico City, Mexico: Compugráfica, 1975). Her other works include *Les secrets du Bureau Politique d'Auschwitz*. (Paris, France: L'Amicale des Déportés D'Auschwitz, 1946). *Tragédie de la Deportation (collaboration, in French)* (Hachette, /éfé). *Auschwitz* (collaboration, in German) (Hamburg, Germany: 1962). *El holocausto* (originally written in French) (Mexico: 1963). See also Albert Maltz, *A Tale of One January* (London, England: 1966) (transcription of Dunia Wasserstrom's flight).
17. Ibid., p. 71.
18. Op. cit., p. 120.

Since the writing of this article, two texts critical to this subject have been published. The first is Caesar C. Aronsfeld, *The Ghosts of 1492: Jewish Aspects of the Struggle for Religious Freedom in Spain 1848-1976*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). The second text is the first English translation of the Hebrew original by Haim Avni, *Spain and the Jews*.