

The Dynamics of History

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The Jewish Search for a Usable Past, by David G. Roskies. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999, The Helen and Martin Schwartz Lectures in Jewish Studies, 217 pp. + photos, \$24.95.

In 1891, at the very beginning of a career that was to make him one of the three classic writers of modern Yiddish literature, Y.L. Peretz penned a curious little dialogue, "About History," which opened with the following chance encounter:

An acquaintance of mine sits down next to me on a bench in the Krasinki gardens and asks me why I appear so melancholy. "Graetz has died!" I answer. "Blessed be the true Judge!" he responds. "Was he from the neighborhood?"...

The Graetz to whom Peretz was referring was the German Professor Heinrich Graetz, author of the 11-volume *History of the Jews*, one of the seminal achievements of 19th-century Jewish scholarship. Peretz's enlightened narrator could barely conceal his frustration at the fact that an urban, Polish Jew seemed so ill-informed and, even worse, uninterested in the details of his national past: "And when my acquaintance learns from me what Graetz has written, he declares, 'ah, history,' with a voice as amazed as somebody who has just consumed a dozen hard-boiled eggs at once. And when he notices that I am crawling out of my skin, he asks me naïvely: 'And what is the use of history?'"

This is the question that David Roskies, professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, seeks to answer in his timely new book on the Jewish search for a usable past over the last one hundred and some years. Yet Roskies is not an historian in the classic sense of the term. His book is not concerned with history as a scholarly relic,

but it highlights how communities adopt carefully chosen elements from their collective past to form the building blocks of contemporary identity and culture. In so doing, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* traces the achievements and failures of efforts to imagine, reconstruct, and interpret those Jewish symbols, heroes, collective myths, and cultural landscapes that best sustained the Jewish transition from tradition to modernity, from shtetl to metropolis, and from the Old World to America and the Land of Israel. Building upon the theory of "creative betrayal" — rebellion and loss as the precondition for renewal — that he introduced in his study of Yiddish storytelling — *A Bridge of Longing* (1995) — Roskies here broadens his focus to the sphere of general Jewish culture and collective memory.

In challenging populist readings of culture that tend to accord too much importance to the masses in cultural change, the book emphasizes the very conscious efforts at community and nation-building of modern Jewry's artists and intellectuals. His founding heroes of secular cultural regeneration are the Yiddish and Hebrew poets, novelists, songwriters, pedagogues, ideologues, critics and chroniclers whose names now have all but been forgotten even if the contours of contemporary Jewish culture owe much to their innovations. In exploring how these "surveyors of a new Jewish life" were at one and the same time the "purveyors of Jewish memory," the book seeks to identify the forces and personalities that drove Jewish national creativity and self-consciousness into the modern era.

Roskies is not afraid to take to task other scholars of contemporary Jewish culture for what he understands to be their oversights and simplifications. The entire work pitches itself against present-day ideologues of nostalgia who seek Jewish authenticity in "glitzy, sentimental, mass-marketed ethnic pop," without trying to gain access to the arguments, chasms, and sophistication of the Eastern European Jewish and immigrant

experiences as they were truly experienced. For instance, the book opens by throwing down the gauntlet to those teachers and students who have yet to master the linguistic and cultural tools necessary to decode the finite canon of works composed of the Holocaust (that is, during World War II itself), written primarily in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish. In highlighting how very different this unknown, closed canon of wartime Jewish writing reads from the universalizing library of postwar literature about the Holocaust that dominates college curricula, Roskies asks a pointed but needed question: "Where does one seek the truth about the Holocaust?" In so doing, he seeks nothing less than to reconfigure the entire canon.

Roskies is among a group of scholars who prefers to emphasize how specific texts, symbols, and motifs have been reworked continuously through time into recognizable archetypes of Jewish response to catastrophe. His chapters on the library of Jewish catastrophe, and a secret archive of Jewish cultural treasures in the Warsaw Ghetto known by the code name "Oyneg Shabbes," are crucial if we are to understand that Jewish responses to the Holocaust did not simply emerge out of the moment but relied heavily upon the various revolutions in Jewish self-expression that preceded them in the first four decades of the 20th century. In so doing, we learn that not only has the shadow of the professional Holocaust industry long cheated readers out of the richness of Jewish life prior to World War II but, in so doing, has fudged the complexities and imaginativeness of Jewish cultural responses during World War II itself. For instance, the efforts of such writers like the Hebrew poet Chaim Nahman Bialik and the Russian-Yiddish writer Sh. Ansky respectively to chronicle the destruction of Jewish communities in Kishiniev (1903) and Galicia (1914-17) set in motion a documentary revolution in Jewish life that became an integral part of the Jewish program of self-emancipation and self-preservation long before the cry went up from the Polish ghettos to take up the pen as witness. Efforts during and after World War I to collect folk materials, to gather statistics, to stress the importance of eyewitness accounts and autobiographical writing, and to establish such modern institutions as the Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in Vilna assured that the program of self-chronicling, self-examination, self-criticism was accepted

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as a valuable means of collective preservation and historical assertiveness long before it was tragically accessed during World War II.

The following two chapters examine the process of myth-making in modern Jewish fiction through their discussion of the creation of its now familiar, paradigmatic geographic landscape and stock figures. They contemplate the dynamic behind the shtetl's emergence as "the greatest single invention of Yiddish literature," and chart how the literary fortunes of rabbis and the Chasidic rebbes shifted from that of villainy to spiritual heroism the further away authors and readers moved from traditional Jewish observance. Readers might be interested to learn, for instance, that it was only after writers had condemned the shtetl for its backwardness, only after young Jews had abandoned it in droves for the modern city, and only once it was perceived to be under lethal economic and existential threat, both from within and without, that it was reinvented in literature as "a place more perfect and more durable than ever existed." Once the shtetl was invoked as the heroic site of modern Jewish culture, it follows that its religious leaders would eventually be brought along as its leading rebels. And indeed, only after the writers of the Jewish enlightenment had sufficiently mocked, criticized, parodied, and effaced the religious Jewish leadership that a new generation of authors emerged to resuscitate them; they turned to Chasidic leaders for models of humanism and, in light of the unrestrained brutality of the early 20th century, to rabbis as the perceived guardians of a legally restrained, moral counterculture. These essays are helpful in coming to terms with how a small cadre of secular, cosmopolitan writers and artists managed to create a collective, mythic place of origins so powerful that it maintains its holding power to this very day, especially in the post-*Fiddler On The Roof* Jewish American imagination, as an authentic Jewish paradise lost.

Three subsequent chapters about the Yiddish song repertoire, an innovative cemetery for cultural revolutionaries in New York, and the creation of a Yiddish secular school system in Montreal, Canada, explore the transitional experience of the immigrant generation and its attempt to transmit Old World values to North America. Certainly the most remarkable story involves the establishment of an honor row for Yiddish writers and Jewish revolutionaries at the

Mount Carmel cemetery in Queens, New York. "Sing, my soul, sing!" opens the Yiddish poetic inscription on Avrom Reyzin's tombstone, "Whether life's road is short or long, either way it ends like a distant song. Sing, my soul, sing! The meaning of life is song...." Never before had there been a Jewish cemetery so thoroughly modern in conception and design as the one founded for the honor row at Mount Carmel. Beginning with its first interment — the most beloved Jewish writer of modern times, Sholem Aleichem — the cemetery's directors strove to immortalize the achievements of those Yiddish cultural and political figures who strove to bring Jews out of the ghetto. With highly stylized, even provocative Yiddish poems and epitaphs etched into its tombstones, alongside a new iconography that included lyres, feather-pens, eagles, and even (in contravention of Jewish law) representations of human figures, nowhere before had the act of Jewish commemoration so boldly sought to differentiate itself from traditional methods of Jewish burial while concurrently seeking to inspire future generations. When I first visited the honor row at Mount Carmel several years ago, I was struck by how much thought its internees had devoted to ensuring that their grave-markers showcase the immigrant imagination at its most creative. This attempt to consecrate a sacred space celebrating Jewish artistic and political self-assertiveness in the diaspora ought to compare to the Mount Herzl cemetery in Jerusalem as a modern memory site of international Jewish significance. American Jewry would find its resources well spent if, in addition to sending its children on pilgrimages to the Holocaust museum in Washington, it publicized this very real reminder of idealism and national achievement on its own soil.

It should come as no surprise that the Roskies's tour through lands of the modern Jewish imagination ends in Eretz Israel, because nowhere else has the relationship between collective memory and collective destiny been so interdependent in modern times. In an excellent summary of the conversation between the literary types of the *ba'al guf* (the proto-Zionist hero of action), the *shlemiel* and the *talush* (the anti-heroic superfluous man) in modern Jewish and Israeli fiction, we are guided through the central tension of the modern Jewish consciousness, that is, between the

virtues of power and powerlessness, physicality and spirituality. In reading this chapter, I was reminded again that however much Zionism insisted that it represented a dramatic break with the Jewish past, at its core it remains the most restorative, vibrant cultural movement in the history of the post-enlightenment era. The revival of the Hebrew language, the mining of Biblical and Talmudic resources for the spiritual lore of the people, the reclamation of an ancient homeland, and the re-invention of symbols and myths to serve a modern political polity all signal that the establishment and growth of the State of Israel represent the ultimate and most successful actualization of the Jewish search for a usable past. But readers should be wary of celebrating. The more the post-Zionists in Israel and abroad set "normalcy" — that unbelievable mantra of national mediocrity — as their end-cultural goal for the State of Israel, the more they erode these very foundations of the modern Jewish state.

The search for a usable past is, of course, a universal and timeless quest. In the modern era, Nietzsche's "A Meditation on the Value of History" enjoined us to assess the past according to its value "for the sake of life and action." In the American context, it was the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks who popularized the phrase in his controversial essay, "On Creating a Usable Past" (1918). To Brooks, the creation of a usable past was essential to the development of a healthy literature, "bring[ing] about, for the first time, that sense of brotherhood in effort and in inspiration which is the best promise of a national culture." As both Nietzsche and Brooks intimate, from the perspective of the modern, not only must the past constantly be reinvented to retain its allure, but the past's very value is determined by its usefulness in helping to secure a vibrant tomorrow. As we approach the turn of both century and millennium, the number of books and articles that include the phrase "usable past" in their titles has grown steadily. Roskies is not alone in sensing that the more complex and uncertain the future, the more groups and nations long for what they imagine to be a simpler time when the authentic sources of their collective selves were, so they believe, more self-evident.

In exploring the intersection between history and collective memory in mod-

ern Jewish life, it is helpful to keep in mind historian Carl Schorske's notion that "thinking with history is not the same as thinking about history.... Thinking with history implies the employment of the materials of the past and the configurations in which we organize and comprehend them to orient ourselves to a living present." So, too, the interest here is not with the founders and purveyors of professional Jewish history writing but with those who were most interested in the possible uses of the most malleable elements arising out of Jewish history — its *leitmotifs*, its heroes, its national myths. In its presentation of how such a process was tailored to forge a confident, modern Jewish polity, the book is a welcome antidote to current trends in the Jewish culture wars, particularly in the State of Israel. There, the self-styled New Historians wage war against all remnants of an Israeli or Jewish usable past. In seeking to counter every sustaining national myth with a questioning doubt or a dark truth, these New Historians have effaced Nietzschean "usability" with a post-Zionist "objectivity" in their orientation toward the past. Yet this veneer of professional objectivity, unlike their lay predecessors' creativity, is most concerned with tearing down any positive glosses on, or uses of, the Jewish past that get in the way of their politics of apology and appeasement, and their universalist, de-Judaized vision for the Jewish state. In suggesting that an alternative use of Jewish history exists, readers ought to come away from Roskies's book with an important question with which to confront the Israeli New Historicists:

Is historical truth relentlessly pursued in the name of cynicism the healthiest way to sustain a national community?

Among the book's most important, undeclared contributions to the present Jewish culture wars is how it helps to refocus our understanding of the role of Yiddish in the creation of the modern Jewish identity. In recent years, Yiddish culture has been kidnaped by a mix of Jewish identity-seekers, left-wing political radicals, and European philosemites who have taken the lead in a new type of Jewish nostalgia industry. Driven by a distaste for Hebrew, Israel, religion, or the mainstream Jewish community, their feigned nostalgia for Yiddish (how else to describe a homesickness for a world that was never theirs?) allows individuals in search of a Jewish address to claim a privileged space for themselves by draping themselves in the garments of a past Jewish culture that was unnaturally cut short. In imagining an affinity between the fate of Yiddish and their own delusions of victimization, such individuals suggest that all would be well in the world if only we returned to the sweet klezmer melodies of their imagined shtetl idyll. The fact that few of these new "Yiddishists" can actually read a serious Yiddish text, let alone relate to the traditional shtetl of historical experience, does not matter to those who allow sentiment to guide identity. What emerges in Roskies's book is a timely antidote. In presenting a Yiddish language and culture that was neither cutesy nor sentimental, Yiddish once again finds its authentic voice as a street-smart vernacular that brought Jews into modernity with backs raised.

Critics will contest that Roskies is trying to have the best of both worlds by suggesting that a non-traditional Jewry can only sustain itself through an ongoing search for a Jewish usable past while concurrently attacking those misappropriations of the past that he finds culturally distasteful. Such an argument, however, attacks the messenger and not the message. If anything, the book demands a familiarity with Jewish history, languages, customs, and culture as the *precondition* for those seeking to mold a Jewish usable past. Roskies is not subjectively deciding which usable pasts are better than others. Rather, he is suggesting that only those that flow out of Jewish knowledge, rather than lack of it, deserve our serious attention.

If Roskies's book lacks anything, it is its unwillingness to expand on the forms this Jewish search for a usable past might take in the next generation. In dedicating so much of his space to chronicling the achievements of earlier cultural revolutionaries, his afterword on the dissolution of contemporary Jewry into competing camps that no longer may be able (or willing) to share the same past any more calls for elaboration. As a result, I was left with a strange aftertaste. For if the vast majority of the modern reformers who are the subject of his study realized their search for a usable past only after a formal Jewish education and still in a Jewish language, how will a similar dynamic be possible for subsequent generations? With most Jews today lacking the appetite for Jewish languages, lore, and texts in which to mine for a past (let alone a usable one), the answer is by no means certain. •

Martyrdom and Sainthood

Leslie Cohen

Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust, by Rachel Feldhay Brenner. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State Press, 1998, vi, 216 pp.

The four Holocaust martyrs whose writings comprise the basis for this volume are Edith

Stein, Etty Hillesum, Anne Frank, and Simone Weil. Edith Stein was gassed in Auschwitz in 1942, Simone Weil starved herself to death in London in 1943, Etty Hillesum died in Auschwitz in 1943, and Anne Frank died in Bergen-Belsen in 1945. All four wrote autobiographical works about their experiences during the Holocaust, which Brenner sees as deliberate defiance of Nazi terror. Brenner opposes the belief that chronicling the Holocaust while it was occurring — with an understand-

ing of its magnitude — was beyond human ability. She argues that Stein, Weil, Hillesum, and Frank were fully conscious of the Holocaust's "radical otherness" and determined to oppose the perpetrators. The four writers are compared on the basis of their responses to critical issues — including religious, ethical, artistic, and feminist concerns — which are discussed in a balanced manner, with ample reference to scholarly sources.

One pivotal common feature of the four women is their "ethnoreligious identity crisis," having come from Jewish origins yet having chosen to identify with a Christian ideological outlook — although each to a different extent. Born into "well-off, well-educated fami-

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