An exploration of suffering, God and the Jews

AGAINST THE APOCALYPSE
Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture
By David Roskies. Harvard University Press. 352 pp. $20.

By Mark Silk

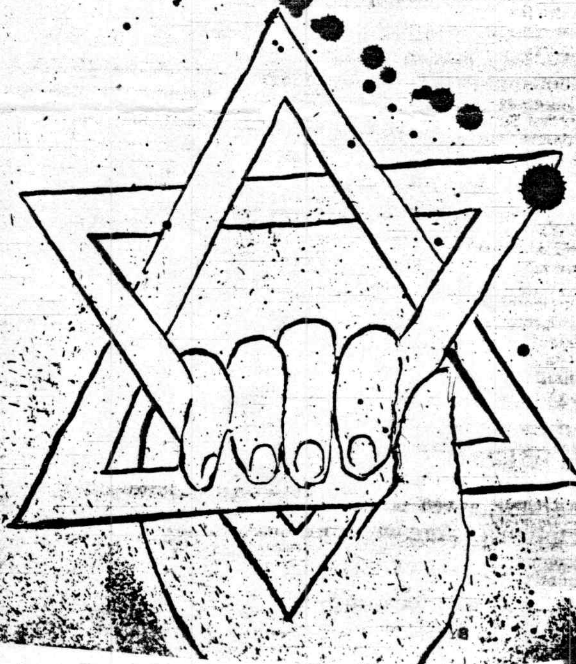
Thanks to popular television shows, new school curricula and steadily growing shelves of historical research, the Nazi extermination of European Jewry has in recent years come before the American public with ever increasing force. We call it the Holocaust – a strange word (from the Greek for "burnt whole") suggesting a total and unique destruction. In Yiddish, however, the event is known as "The Third Destruction," the other two being the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. In Yiddish, the name signals a continuity with past disasters that were themselves survived.

It is the nature of this continuity that David Roskies, a teacher of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, undertakes to explore.

His book, as he says at the outset, is about liturgy, for

APOCALYPSE, Page A13

Mark Silk is a lecturer on history and literature at Harvard.



■ **APOCALYPSE**

Continued from Page A11

liturgical recall was the fundamental Jewish response to collective catastrophe. Disasters were grouped together by date to be communally lamented in the annual cycle of worship; historical details gave way to a pattern of timeless analogies. And so, down through history, each new disaster – the assaults on the Rhineland communities during the First Crusade, the Cossack pogroms of 1648-49 – was understood in terms of the liturgical record, and then in turn made part of the liturgy. Remembered in prayer, disaster itself became an occasion for reaffirming the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

The Temple was destroyed *and* it was profaned; Jews were killed *and* Torahs were burned. The desecration that inevitably accompanied violence against the Jews inspired, though more rarely, a different kind of response as well, that of complaint against God. The pious Jew in a sense re-enacted the persecutor's sacrilege by parodying holy texts and calling the covenant into question. "Who is like You, mighty in self-restraint?" wrote one of the Talmudic sages. "You heard the blasphemy and the insults of that wicked man, but You kept silent!" This response, stripped from its context of traditional piety, came into its own during the modern period, in the stories of Abramovitsh, and above all in the pogrom poems of Markish, Leivick, Halpern and Bialik.

These names, and nearly all the many others discussed by Roskies, will be familiar to very few American readers today, Jew or Gentile. From the middle of the 19th century until the Final Solution, a host of writers of conspicuous talent and diversity flourished throughout the length and breadth of Jewish eastern Europe. They were a contentious lot, fighting over Zionism and socialism, Yiddish and Hebrew, belief and unbelief. Some romanticized the *stetl*; others denounced it for greed and superstition. Accelerating anti-Semitic violence inspired a wide range of artistic responses, some of which infuriated Jewish audiences.

In the folklore of the time, Lithuanian Jews were notorious for intellectual rigor and a determination to see things exactly as they were. Roskies, whose roots are in the Lithuanian capital of Vilna, brings to his beloved authors and their people this *Litvak* passion for the truth. He tells his story – warts, internal conflicts and all – with scrupulous scholarship and superb evenhandedness.

Yet his heart is with the writers he calls neo-classicists, those like Sholem Aleichem who, in responding to new historical realities, nonetheless kept in touch with the ancient traditions of response to catastrophe. It is with the apocalyptists, those who saw catastrophe as the end of everything, that he has the least patience.

On the eve of the death camps, the Jews of eastern Europe were for the first time forced to live in ghettos. There, in a kind of supreme irony, the contention lessened, literature thrived, and there came into being the closest thing that history had known to the in-gathered "holy community" of Jewish hope. And, in the face of genocide, the entire array of response to catastrophe, even the most antitraditional, was welcomed into a larger tradition.

In his final chapter, Roskies notes how both Elie Wiesel and Isaac Bashevis Singer, in supervising French and English translations of their postwar Yiddish novels "Night" and "The Family Moskat," carefully suppressed messages of remembrance and redemption in order to highlight themes of madness and nihilism. It was, he suggests, a way of currying favor with an outside literary culture then enthusiastic for the existentialist point of view. And it betokened something sadder:

"By expunging the 'parochial' message of hope and continuity, Wiesel and Singer. . . acknowledge a break deeper by far than existential despair, this break being the end of the dialogue between eastern European Jewish writers and their Jewish audience. Since most of that audience can no longer read what these writers have reserved for its eyes alone, it is left with the 'nonparochial' message instead, and that is a message of complete despair."

In this profound, subtle and deeply moving book, Roskies lets us listen to the dialogue that the Nazis destroyed. It is hard to imagine a better way of keeping faith with those who died.