

Roskies

Book Reviews

EDITED BY CLIVE SINCLAIR

Challenging the apocalyptic tendency

Full marks for effort

CHAIM BERMANT

I've Taken A Page in the Bible.
Alfred Marks: Robson. £7.95.

The common definition of a Jewish joke is one which Jews have heard and gentiles can't understand. One certainly finds some very old friends in Alfred Mark's collection, of which the following is perhaps my favourite:

"A top American doctor was known for his very high fees, but he never charged the clergy for treatment. When a Catholic priest came for an examination and asked what the fee was, the doctor replied, 'Nothing.' To show his thanks the priest sent him a small silver cross. The second patient was a Protestant vicar, who, in gratitude for the free treatment, sent the doctor a bound leather Bible.

"The third patient was a rabbi. He sent him another rabbi!"

It would sound even better if one could imagine the rich, sonorous Marks voice behind it and I am surprised that he hasn't put his collection on tape for, given his skill as a raconteur, one would much rather hear him than read him.

Not that he is bad to read. He has cast his net back to the times of the Talmud and forward to 3036, C.E., that is (an inevitable joke) with jokes about Jews in space and has thus, so to speak, extended the frontiers of Jewish experience. A few of the jokes are Jewish only by conversion, which is to say they could have been Russian or Polish or Hungarian jokes, but for the fact that the characters have been given Jewish names. Otherwise one has the usual *dramatis personae*, the

"The Origins of the Romanesque" by V. I. Atroshenko and Judith Collins (Lund Humphries, £25) contains a detailed examination of the synagogue at Dura Euros, Syria, whose wall-paintings are the glory of early Jewish art. Pity the illustrations don't match the others in the book.

shadchonim and schnorers, and rabbis and doctors and tailors, and furriers and salesmen, plus the quirky logic that distinguishes the Jewish joke from others, and one finds oneself cackling almost continuously.

The fact that most of them have already appeared in other collections is almost beside the point, for such compilations tend to be short-lived and this one is particularly welcome if only because Mr Marks has added his own particular touch to many of the stories and has given them a raciness they may not always have possessed.

Unfortunately, he appears to have been anxious to produce a largish book where a smallish one would have sufficed, and has padded it out with lengthy extracts from the works of Sholom Aleichem, Mordechai Richler, Woody Allen and others, which are still in print and to which, of course, he could add nothing.

As they used to say in *der heim*: no rabbi lost his job because his sermons were too short.

JIRI WYATT

Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture. David G. Roskies. Harvard UP. £18.95.

David G. Roskies begins his book by posing an, absolutely critical question: Is the Holocaust an *historical catastrophe*, or an "Event" beyond history? "The Jewish people are at the point," he suggests, "of allowing the Holocaust to become the crucible of their culture," creating an impassable divide between Jewish present and Jewish past. His aim is "to challenge this apocalyptic tendency by arguing for the vitality of Jewish response to catastrophe."

One expects, at this point, an importantly unpopular argument that explores the actual as against the Mythic dimensions of the Holocaust. Certainly *that work* needs to be done, if not least to combat the indecent adoration of the Holocaust by sectors of world Jewry, especially some US Jews for whom the Holocaust has been an exclusively literary experience.

Roskies argues against apocalypse

by reference to what he sees as a *tradition* of Jewish response, one that begins with interpretations of the destruction of the Temple and continues through the Holocaust to the present. The bulk of the book — as well as its strength — consists of detailed analysis of Jewish writing and painting in response to lesser and greater pogroms across the centuries, but in particular during the last one hundred years in Eastern Europe (by which Roskies means almost exclusively Poland.) The book is an illuminating reinterpretation of the tri-lingual literature — in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish — of these years and places.

The *tradition* of response to catastrophe, in Roskies's view, is typified by suppression of actual history in favour of a textual or liturgical narrative whose meaning is emblematic and that moves from lament to redemption in a kind of continuous present. Stressed are "subjective realities rather than the verifiable facts of destruction."

It becomes clear as one reads that to substantiate his view Roskies intends to raise to prominence a literature that usually, in the established accounts, is seen as parochial, as inferior to, say, Babel or Kafka. Roskies's accounts of

the work of Sholem Abramovitch or Lamed Shapiro or Abraham Sutzkever or Uri Zvi Greenberg are what make the book worth reading.

But here too the problems begin. Not only is Lamed Shapiro *not* Kafka but just how Kafka or Babel fit into Roskies's scheme is far from clear. Intent on establishing a *tradition*, Roskies incorporates *all* Jewish writing into it. If one author translates catastrophe into Myth and another tears this Myth down by insisting on the facts, this doesn't bother Roskies.

More serious is the matter of how Roskies's tradition applies to the Holocaust. He tells us that no sooner had the Holocaust commenced than it was turned into Myth. Very well — does he think we should assent or that we should be appalled? I have no idea. For the most startling aspect of the book is its treatment of the response to the Holocaust. As he approaches the fateful dates, one waits for his answer to the question that opens his study.

The answer never comes. The Holocaust and the response to it amazingly, receive almost no attention. And insofar as attention is paid, Roskies glances at those aspects of the Holocaust that resemble past catastrophes, that is, destruction of towns, murder of Jews. He does not say a word about life in the concentration camps. Elie Wiesel is mentioned twice, more or less in passing — and that's it. Of other outstanding writing about the camps — say Primo Levi's "If This Is A Man" or, by a non-Jew, Tadeusz Borowski's phenomenal "This Way To The Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" — we hear nothing. I arrived at the close of the book dumbfounded. How can Roskies say anything about the Holocaust without attempting to come to grips with life in the camps?

"Against the Apocalypse," then, achieves far less than it promises, which is a shame. We get a valuable interpretation and history of writing and painting by Polish Jews during the last century. What we don't get is what is most needed: an informed discussion of the great, inflammatory questions about the continuity of Jewish experience in light of the Holocaust.

Mouth-watering memories



Colonel Berek Joselewicz, Jewish hero of the Kosciusko uprising, and the Remo Synagogue, Cracow, from "The Jews of Poland, Recollections and Recipes" by Edouard de Pomane, translated by Josephine Bacon (Phollota Press, 263 High Road, London N17, £7.95). A real ragout of a book.