

Book Review

Apocalyptic Catastrophes

'Against the Apocalypse: Responses to catastrophe in modern Jewish culture'

by David E Roskies

Seldom does a book deal with a subject of great nobility and itself a noble book. Edmund Wilson's history of the left 'To the Finland Station' and Shalom Spiegel's recounting of the modern Hebrew renaissance 'Hebrew Reborn' are examples. Such books are not only beautifully written, but are irrefusable invitations to discover the worlds with which they concern themselves. David G Roskies' 'Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture' can now join the ranks.

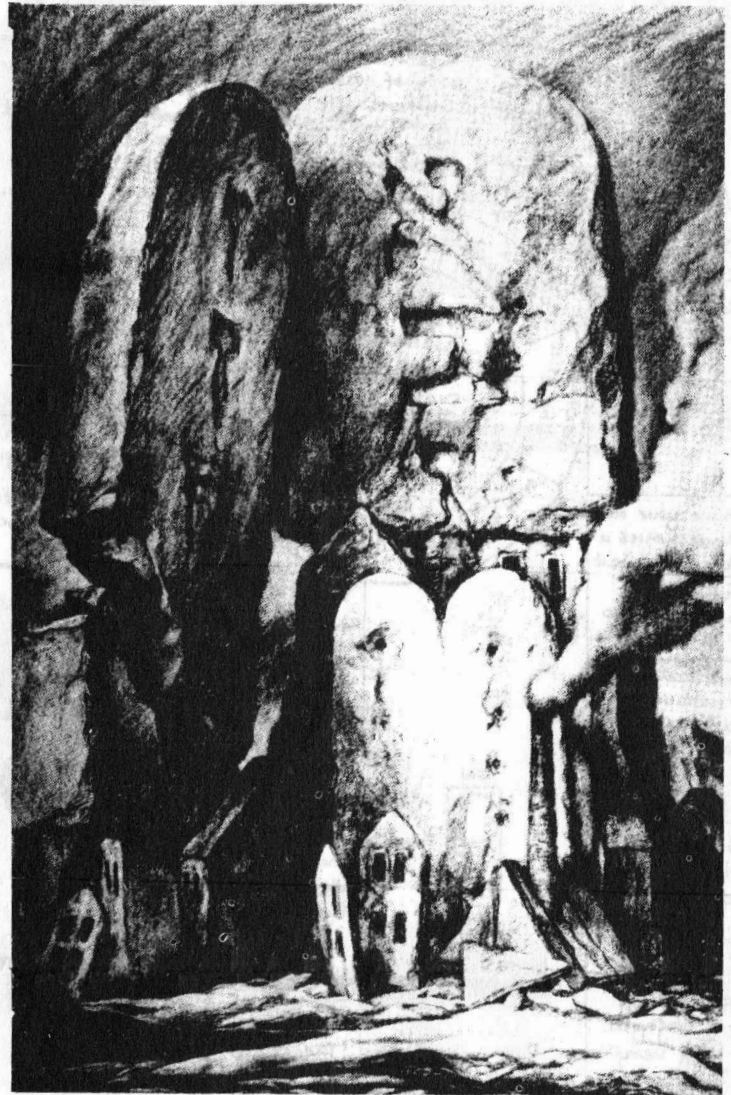
Roskies' book has an added benefit: by reading it one undergoes the very redemptive experience Roskies sets out to describe

Roskies' setting is the now lost world of Eastern European history. In the main, he deals with pogroms and the Holocaust. From the closing decades of the last century until the Allied liberation of the camps in 1945, the forces of history have worked at routing Jews from Eastern Europe. This entailed the eradication of Jews, Jewish institutions, language and culture. Encapsulating the Hebrew/Yiddish poet Uri Zvi Greenberg's vision of the onslaught, Roskies writes:

*What wilt thou do without
houses of prayer
And without Jews - no Jews
anywhere?
Who will recite the psalm of the
Day
And who will suffer gratuitously?*

Like Sutzkever searching for Jewish remnants in the ruins of post-war Vilna, like Ansky gathering ethnographic details of the disappearing Ukrainian Jewry, like Bialik cataloguing the scenes in Kishniev after the pogrom — all the artists sought to salvage what was being destroyed by transcending the destruction through their art. If it is Shalom Aleichem 'laughing off the trauma of history', or Bialik condemning God to exile, or Yosel Bergner crucifying man the Jew as a vegetable-grate on a pole — the artist attempted to prevail against the pogroms, the rape of the Shtetl, the expulsions, Ghettoes and gas-chambers. Because their art was rooted in a Jewish idiom, their response is a redemption.

At the end of his book, Roskies writes; 'It has been their (artists) ability in the midst and in the wake of apocalypse to know the apocalypse, express it, mourn it, and transcend it; for if catastrophe is the presumption of man acting as destroyer, then the fashioning of catastrophe into a



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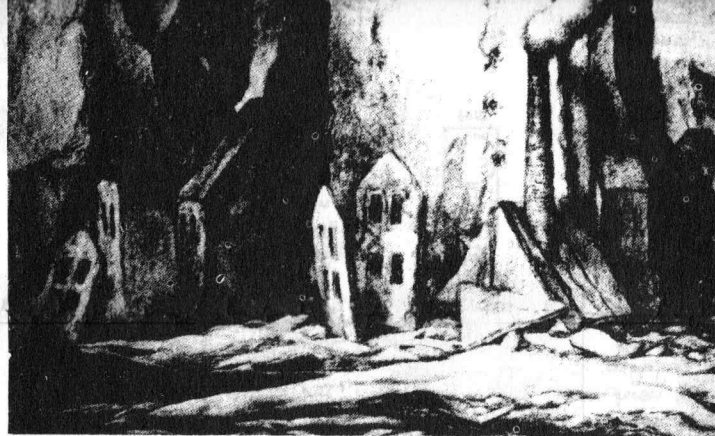
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The artist tried to respond to the ultimate catastrophe — a Europe (World) without Jews. The poetic Giant of the Vilna Ghetto, Yitzchak Katznelson, wrote:

through their art. If it is Shalom Aleichem 'laughing off the trauma of history', or Bialik condemning God to exile, or Yosl Bergner crucifying man the Jew as a vegetable-grate on a pole — the artist attempted to prevail against the pogroms, the rape of the Shtetl, the expulsions, Ghettoes and gas-chambers. Because their art was rooted in a Jewish idiom, their response is a redemption.

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'Against the Apocalypse' is a veritable Bible of modern Jewish culture. Roskies first acquaints the reader with classic Jewish liturgical responses to catastrophe in the past. Then, starting with the father of modern Yiddish literature, SY Rabinovich, he launches into his subject.



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The order proceeds episodically and chronologically: anti-traditional responses; pogroms; the alienation of the individual; Cantonists; Ghettoes; gas chambers; and, finally, the culminating epiphany of the Jew on the cross.

Roskies tapestry is vast. He examines Yiddish and Hebrew poetry, stories, novels, plays, songs, children's rhymes, pamphlets, press-cuttings, paintings, sketches and photographs. Especially profound is his penetrating analysis of modern Jewish visual arts. Some artists are dealt with briefly, while others, like Shalom Aleichem, Greenberg and Katznelson, are given detailed treatment.

There are also excellent self-contained mini essays like the one on Agnon's 'A Guest for the Night' and the analysis of Avrom Akslerod's reformulation of Yiddish nursery rhymes. Towering above the entire gallery, it is easy to discern Avram Sutzkever as Roskies' personal favourite.

There has been a burgeoning of efforts to recapture the Jewish World destroyed by Hitler. In an age where 95% of young Jews cannot understand Yiddish;

where 'der Heim' from where our grandparents originated is nothing more than a Hollywood set in YENTL; where there is no longer a distinct secular Jewish culture — we, the youth, desperately fumble in the dark struggling to find out how it really was in 'der Heim'. After all, we are of the few remnants of that lost world.

Roskies proves to us that it is only through art that the essence, the very spirit of the past can be experienced in the present. 'Against the Apocalypse' should be an obligatory text for anyone who takes his Judaism and his personal identity seriously. The Nazis stole from us our origins. If we do not cherish our past, we give to the Nazis and Pogrom-chikim the final victory.

Sutzkever wrote a poem in which Ghetto fighters melt down leaden Hebrew figures on bronze tablets in front of a Synagogue's Ark. With the molten lead the fighters fashion bullets. The word, the spirit of Judaism is refashioned to form the tools of Jewish survival. In Roskies's book lie all the tools for future Jewish survival.

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