

They Did Witness

About : Judith Lindenberg (ed.), *Premiers savoirs de la Shoah*, Paris, CNRS éditions

By Nick Underwood

When did Holocaust survivors start speaking about their experiences? Were their voices heard? A prevailing myth states that witnesses remained silent during the postwar years. However, Judith Lindenberg’s edited volume argues that the “urgency to say and make known was present from the beginning of the genocide”.

In the United States, there was, until recently, a prevailing myth that went something like this: after the Holocaust, survivors did not speak much about their experiences because American Jews were not that interested in hearing these stories; it was not until the 1960s, as a result of Adolf Eichmann’s trial in 1961 and the 1967 War in Israel, that Jews in America began to place the Holocaust at the center of their Jewish identity. This perception was popularized by Peter Novick’s *The Holocaust in American Life* in 1991. There is now, however, a new wave of scholars weighing in to dispel this myth. At the center of this reinterpretation is Hasia Diner’s work: in *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962*¹, she argued that Jews in the United States absolutely spoke of, remembered, and commemorated the Holocaust as early as 1945. In France, Annette Wieviorka compelled us to think about Holocaust “witnesses” as coming in three stages, the first of which came before Novick’s periodization: Novick centers his claims on years beginning in the late 1960s. Her focus on “the era of the witness” shows that

¹ New York University Press, 2010, for a review see <https://booksandideas.net/A-So-Called-Silence.html>

although witnesses told their story before 1961, it was not until then that survivors were considered as “bearers of history².” Alongside Diner and Wieviorka’s work now sit several edited volumes and monographs in English and French that all have their sights set on dismantling this myth of silence. It is here where Judith Lindenberg’s edited volume *Premiers savoirs de la Shoah* stands. Working as a “mosaic”, its sixteen articles argue that the “urgency to say and make known was present from the beginning of the genocide” (8).

Lindenberg’s volume aims to contribute to this international discussion on Jews’ supposed silence in the wake of the Holocaust. However, the scope is not limited to the postwar years. The articles that make up this volume also speak to notions of reportage and testimony during the Holocaust itself and also primarily build upon Polish-Jewish accounts. In this way, *Premiers savoirs de la Shoah* broadens our understanding of both the larger intellectual context within which Emanuel Ringelblum’s now famous Warsaw Ghetto archive³ was formed and puts the focus on Holocaust awareness, and commemoration on both the war and postwar years.

Bearing Witness and Describing the Indescribable

The interdisciplinary focus of *Premiers savoirs de la Shoah* allows the volume’s overall argument to shine. Indeed, the volume’s point of departure and what makes it unique and a welcome contribution to the discussion is that it tries “to draw a border between what would be considered ‘historiography on genocide’ and ‘testimony literature’ (12). Additionally, *Premiers savoirs de la Shoah* seeks to even break down, or at least add to, what one might consider “resistance.” Here, the mere act of writing can and ought to be thought of as an “act of resistance” (14). Furthermore, to demonstrate that Jews were not silent during the postwar years, the collection, once again, employs a multidisciplinary approach: we read of commemorations, cultural innovation and creativity, such as the development of theatre journals and literature, and groups’ attempts to make anew in the wake of catastrophe.

² Paris, Plon, 1998.

³ Thanks to Samuel Kassow’s book *Who Will Write Our History. Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*, University of Indiana Press, 2018 and newly released film of the same name.

The three sections of *Premiers savoirs de la Shoah* take approaches based in literary, political, memory, and urban studies to diversify our understanding of Holocaust witnessing and memorialization, and post-catastrophic intellectual and artistic creativity. The first part centers on people who, during the war and postwar years, forged a practice of writing that emphasized depicting the events of which they were witnesses and victims. This section also interrogates what happened to writings before and after publication. Simply, how did people respond to these texts? In this part, readers will enjoy exposure to a number of lesser known (to a wider readership) Jewish authors to whom Samuel Kassow, Catherine Coquio, Judith Lyon-Caen, Arnaud Bikard, Carole Ksiazenice-Matheron, Laetitia Tordjman, and Anna Ciarkowska make them aware.

Premiers savoirs de la Shoah's second part presents “institutions of knowledge and memory and reflects on the political stakes of writing about genocide during the Cold War” (19). In this section, Laura Jockusch exposes us to how new institutions, such as the Centre de documentation juive contemporaine (CDJC), developed. Cecile Kuznitz shows how institutions that existed before the war, specifically the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (<https://yivo.org>), approached Jewish scholarship and archival practices in the wake of genocide. As the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow implored people to do, these institutions “Collect(ed) and Record(ed).”⁴

Rebuilding Yiddish Communities in Postwar Europe

The third section focuses on place. And it is there that the collection makes its most exciting interventions. First, Buenos Aires is investigated as a city of postwar Yiddish cultural survival by way of a series of articles on the project *Dos poylishe yidntum*, a collection of 175 volumes published between 1946 and 1966. *Dos poylishe yidntum* comprised heterogeneous pieces from testimonies, novels, and poetry to folklore collections and historical works that all work to demonstrate, in the words of contributor Jan Schwarz, that: “the history of postwar Yiddish culture is the story of a small group of surviving writers whose work and cultural leadership of Yiddish editors and contributors shaped the Yiddish cultural turn after 1945” (237). Through Schwarz’s transnationalism, Malena Chinski’s study of correspondence, and Judith

⁴ On Dubnow, see Robert Seltzer, accessed March 25, 2019, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dubnow_Simon.

Lindenberg's demonstration of how this project shaped postwar studies on genocide history, we gain a better understanding of how Polish Jews, no matter where they found themselves, tried to bear witness and process and understand those experiences.

Our focus is later shifted back towards Europe where we encounter the new capital of European Yiddish culture: Paris. Prior to the war, it was indeed a "hub" of Yiddish culture, but it was not, to use Dovid Bergelson's words, one of the three centers of Yiddish culture, which were Moscow, Warsaw, and New York. This changed in the postwar years, and the second half of part three of *Premiers savoirs de la Shoah* makes that abundantly clear. There was a vibrancy and diversity to the Yiddish culture that emerged in Paris beginning as early as 1944, and the young scholars represented in this section capitalize on that fact. In Constance Pâris de Bollardière's piece on the Bundist author and actor Yankev Pat, she shows how his writings looked towards the future of Yiddish that he foresaw as one that was plural. She writes, "The correspondence he maintains... allows us to present... their social and cultural solidarity" (291). The next pieces by Simon Perego and Éléonore Biezunski demonstrate the importance of the Warsaw Ghetto in the memory of Jews and the revitalization of Yiddish theatre in postwar France. Perego shows that from early on, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a fundamental part of how Jews in France commemorated the Holocaust. It should be noted that the same was true in the United States and is highlighted in a forthcoming special issue of the journal *American Jewish History*. This is a topic that is new for our historical understanding of how Jews decided to commemorate the Holocaust in the immediate and not so immediate years after the Holocaust. Biezunski reminds us that the Yiddish theatrical revival in postwar France was impressive. Yiddish theatre was restaged in France almost as soon as Paris was liberated, and, during the late 1940s, even hosted a relatively successful theatre troupe, the *Yidisher kunst teater* (Yiddish Art Theatre), which grew out of the interwar theatre troupe the *Parizer yidisher avangarde teater* (Parisian Yiddish Avantgarde Theatre). The theatre revue *Der teater shpigl* (The Theatre Mirror), studied in Biezunski's essay, codified that early postwar cultural output and put it in print. It was a major enterprise, too. It ran for ten years and Elie Wiesel served as the first editor in chief. The Yiddish speaking community in postwar France, as it did during the 1930s, knew that theatre was engagement and you could not rebuild a community if you did not engage people. *Der teater shpigl*, Biezunski shows us, was a major part of those efforts, as the journal helped extend the theatregoing experience onto the newsstands and into the home.

Wartime and Postwar: A Break in Experiences?

Judith Lindenberg's *Premiers savoirs de la Shoah* demonstratively puts forth a new agenda. It resets how we think about the continuities between wartime and postwar "testimony" and also reshapes what we think counts as testimony. And, by extension, what counts as resistance. The reluctance to see rupture where there was continuity is also a refreshing angle of the book, achieved by the arrangement of the chapters. Lindenberg should also be commended for editing a volume that successfully puts into conversation a diverse set of scholars where each piece furthers the overall impetus of the book. If that was not enough, the selection of pieces also demonstrates the careful thought put into this volume, not only is the overall argument, which challenges the periodization of what and when something can be considered Holocaust "testimony," of the book satisfying, but new voices (both new in terms of scholars as well as novelty to French readers) are so well blended and make for a stimulating read.

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