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Review of Mihaela Gligor (ed.), Memories of Terror

Essays on Recent Histories

CEEOL Press, Frankfurt am Main 2021, 266 pp.,

ISBN: 978-3-946993-88-9 (print); ISBN: 978-3-946993-87-2 (e-book)

“What should we do to keep their memory alive?” This is the trigger and the recurrent question that the volume *Memories of Terror: Essays on Recent Histories*, edited by the Romanian philosopher and historian Mihaela Gligor, tries to give proper and articulated answers to. Still, this is not the first time that such a question is being raised. On the contrary, that question goes back to the very origin of humankind as a species, not living only in the present time, but feeding its spiritual life from past happenings and looking with hope into the future. The present is only the stage for action, for decision-making, as the time of alchemical mixture and of self-transformation concerning individual and collective consciousness. It is also the time for preparation and for expressing intentionality for what the human mind projects onto the future, for its own well-being.

Such is the first insight that the editor expresses as this volume’s reason for being. The answer to it is to be found in the very pages of the well-articulated and sensitive articles written from critical and multidisciplinary approaches by seven female authors with different backgrounds, brought together by a passion for memory in the Jewish community during and in the aftermath of the Shoah. Mihaela Gligor, Sonia Catrina, Eugenia Mihalcea, Olga Ştefan, Katharina Friedla, Tuvia Friling, and Arleen Ionescu are the voices that many people who are no longer alive speak through. Their research, though, goes beyond individual stories and expands into (hi)story and collective destiny.

In the introduction, Professor Raphael Vago from Tel Aviv University opens his plea with a distorted replica of Gligor’s question: “[h]ow do you know that we are interested in keeping you alive?” This question is a reversed understanding of memory. It is the perpetrators’ perspective, it is “how Captain Burădescu, the commanding officer on duty in the Vapniarka concentration camp in Transnistria, replied to a delegation of three inmate physicians who complained about the terrible situation in the camp” (as mentioned in Ştefan’s chapter in this volume). The dust should cover dust and every ends into the darkness of forgetfulness.

The only remedy is telling the (hi)stories and thus keeping those facts, human profiles, and happenings alive, just as one struggles to keep alight the fire against the fierce cold, against the deep darkness and inner fears and monsters.

Telling the stories of those humans and their destinies, looking up details, and trying to put them together in order to reconstruct in a tri-dimensional way the social and historical context – and thus bringing their memory alive – is what this volume aims to do. Humankind is made up of stories, and storytelling is the only way to keep exorcising the evil and maintaining the good. In the foreword, Gligor explains that “[t]he idea of the current volume came to me in July 2019, on a warm Sunday morning, while visiting the Jewish Cemetery on Okopowa Street in War-

saw.” She also mentions the “POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Muzeum Polaków Ratujących Żydów/The Markowa Ulma-Family Museum of Poles Who Saved Jews in World War II, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, the State Museum at Majdanek”. She then adds “and other places where terrible things happened,” because places are indivisibly linked to human destinies. The chapters of this book reveal that it is of utmost importance where one is born, where one comes from, where one lives or is forced to live. The history of humankind is fundamentally a sequence of relocations, migrations, and wanderings, more or less desired, more or less fulfilling.

Following this idea, cemeteries are revealed not only as final places where these tiring wanderings end, but also as *loci memoriae* and as places for the simultaneous reorganisation of living inner emotions and information. They seem the most static places, as nothing really happens there, but their effect on visitors is exactly the opposite. Therefore, it is not surprising that the idea of such a volume of memory was born in a ‘living’ cemetery. The scientific community can be thankful for the effervescent result that this encounter had for prompting this collection of research, which has become a useful and inspiring publication.

The first chapter, written by Sonia Catrina, introduces the argument in a rather abrupt way, using concepts like ‘dehumanisation’, the ‘metaphor of Jewish errant life’, and a ‘sense of self’, regarding Miriam Kober-Bercovici’s first-hand accounts. Lying at the intersection of Jewish studies, memory studies, and gender studies, the objective of this chapter is to ethnographically study a Jewish-Romanian girl’s personal experience during the Holocaust. Miriam Korber (later Bercovici) was born in 1923 to a Jewish family from Câmpulung Moldovenesc, Romania. She was displaced and deported along with her family to Transnistria during the Second World War, living in various ghettos in Bessarabia and later Ukraine, where she kept a diary. The text was first published in Romanian in 1992, after the fall of communism. Sonia Catrina’s analysis of the diary harmoniously combines interdisciplinary tools from sociology, anthropology, gender studies and, of course, history.

The volume continues with Katharina Friedla’s chapter “*When the Shabbat Became Sunday: The Religious and Social Life of Polish Jews in the USSR during World War II*”, which opens with an impressive photo of a large Orthodox Polish Jewish family in exile in the Soviet Union during the Second World War. The author asserts that the body of sources concerning the life of Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union is remarkably extensive. She mentions that the main resources that she used were early accounts held by the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University (including the Władysław Anders Collection and Ministerstwo Informacji i Dokumentacji Records), the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem, and the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum Archive in London (especially the Wincenty Bąkiewicz Collection). Katharina Friedla underlines that she “analyzed a critical mass of testimonies and personal reports from various proveniences, early and later testimonies and interviews, checking them against other sources and comparing them with each other, including testimonies authored by Soviet Jews”. She adds that a rigorous “periodization is a prerequisite for the analysis of the religious life in the Soviet Union” as, from its start, the Soviet regime pursued anti-religious policies and promoted the concept of atheism.

Tuvia Friling presents a thoroughly researched story of Eliezer Gruenbaum, alias Leon Berger (his nom de guerre, taken in order to cut the final ties with his origins), a “Jewish *kapo*, a communist, an anti-Zionist, a secularist, and the son of Yitzhak Gruenbaum, the most prominent secular leader of interwar Polish Jewry and Israel’s first Minister of the Interior”. This is the intriguing story of a member of a Judenrat

taking part in the self-annihilation process as a *Blockaelterste* (block elder); he was elected within the inmate hierarchy to lead the Communist Party cell of the Auschwitz-Birkenau deportation camp. After the liberation, he was rejected in the communities that he tried to re-establish himself in and put under trial, never again to be trusted and accepted. He died in 1948 in battle as a combat soldier of the Haganah, and rumours circulated that his death was in fact an execution by his comrades in revenge for his role in Auschwitz. His life and deeds continued to haunt and raise tensions among Jews in Palestine and Europe, resulting in polarised ideas and groups.

“We are what we remember” is how Mihaela Gligor introduces her chapter, as a legitimate motto of memory studies. She bases her research on the theoretical grounds of specialists like Maurice Halbwachs, Friedrich C. Bartlett, Marc Bloch, Henri Bergson, and even Sigmund Freud and the writer Marcel Proust, who pointed out the importance of the cultural roles of memory and remembrance, based on sites of memory, texts, images, and rituals as identity patterns for a specific community. The case that Gligor brings to light is that of Saul Steinberg (1914–1999), his experiences of anti-semitism and xenophobia in interwar Romania, and how his memories of his home country influenced his artistic work in his final homeland, the United States, where he ended up after passing through Italy and the Dominican Republic. The socio-cultural climate in which Saul Steinberg grew up proved to be highly toxic and unproductive. The rise of fascist ideologies and groups like the Iron Guard or the Archangel Michael Legion, led by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, forced many young members of the Jewish communities to emigrate to Western countries to escape humiliation and harassment. They also emigrated because of denaturalisation, which resulted from the legislative Decree No. 169 regarding the revision of Romanian citizenship (adopted by the Goga government on 21 January 1938), by which some quarter of a million Romanian Jews lost their Romanian citizenship. Saul Steinberg fled to Italy and started university and work as an editorial drawer. Soon, racial laws came into force in Italy as well and, after graduating as an architect, he had to flee to America, where he married a fellow Romanian artist, Hedda Sterne. He found a special place in his art and memory for Palas Street in Bucharest, where he had grown up, and for his country of origin which he chose not to visit again, as such places “don’t belong to geography but to time [...]. It’s better to leave certain things in peace, just the way they are in memory: with the passage of time they become the mythology of our lives.”

Arleen Ionescu’s “Traces of Survival in a World of Terror” examines the case of Kathy Kacer in a rather unusual Jewish China, as described in Kacer’s book *Shanghai Escape*. The author of the article begins by giving some details about the historical context: “Before and during World War II, when more than six million European Jews perished in concentration and death camps, the only country that saved a significant number of Jewish people fleeing from Hitler’s hell in Europe was China.” Shanghai offered “a safe haven for Jews at the most horrific moment in human history”, according to Jackie Eldan, a former consul general of Israel in Shanghai. There, German, Austrian, Russian, Polish, and Lithuanian Jews landed in several stages after 1933, by the tens of thousands, which meant as many saved lives. They did not have an easy life in China, especially during the Second Sino-Japanese War, when poverty struck refugees from the Japanese-controlled territories who were concentrated in Shanghai. However, they were at least not in the horrific situation that their families and friends in Europe were. A Chinese ‘Schindler’s List’ was established in recently annexed Austria by Dr Ho Feng Shan, the Chinese consul, who offered the

Austrian Jews life-saving visas to Shanghai despite this irritating the Nazis. 'Noah's Arks' sailed away from Europe all the way to China, loaded with Jewish families, while Dr Ho was dismissed for the sake of diplomatic relations between Germany and China. Chinese people offered hospitality to Jewish refugees coming in different waves, and Chinese hospitals accepted and saved Jewish people's lives, the author shows. Even in difficult situations, like in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbour, the Chinese authorities "protected their guests and never manifested any anti-semitic hostility". The rich narratives on the subject, such as *Shanghai Escape*, endorse and bring further material to the historical data regarding places of memory and 'witnessing witnessing'. The book is analysed through an interdisciplinary approach and the article brings further light to the subject by means of psychoanalysis, memory and trauma studies, history, and literature, offering a vast and sharp picture of the Shanghai Ghetto.

The sixth chapter, written by Eugenia Mihalcea, touches on the sensitive subject of how Romanian Jewish children who went on to live in Israel remember the Holocaust and the inconceivable horror of 1.5 million children being condemned to death in the gas chambers. Most of these children were Jewish, but there were also Roma or disabled children; only six to eleven per cent of all the children survived, much less than the figure for adults (33 per cent). The children were the first to be killed and the last to testify. As the author herself discloses, "the study is based on testimonies of children survivors who were deported to Transnistria during the Holocaust, but who were no longer children by the time they first testified. Consequently, their testimonies must be viewed in light of the fact that their perception of their own past is in close connection with their experiences over the years. In order to show that I analyzed children survivors' testimonies using narrative qualitative research" on seven cases from the Kestenberg Archive, from the unique project led in the 1980s by Dr Judith S. Kestenberg and her husband, Milton Kestenberg.

The last chapter of the volume is Olga Ștefan's study on the Vapniarka special status concentration camp for political prisoners in Transnistria when it was under Romanian rule, namely under Marshal Antonescu from 1941. The article analyses the survivors' testimonies, through journals, books, recorded testimonies, and artistic objects. Olga Ștefan highlights precious details about the daily life in the camp up to the liberation when, on 6 March 1943, a commission was sent to the camp to select the Jews who had been hospitalised by mistake. It was determined that out of the 554 Jews who were arrested, 427 had no valid basis for being detained. Paradoxically, instead of being sent home, they had to pass through other ghettos first. The remaining internees, the leaders of the clandestine communist collective of the camp, were transferred to Ribnita and massacred by retreating SS troops on 17 March 1944. In the conclusion, Ștefan points out that Vapniarka, "despite its very diverse population, and its designation as a camp for political prisoners, was just another Jewish camp in Transnistria with a regime of extermination".

As the afterword underlines, the volume is a collection of rare points of view and cases about the 'Time of Terror' and the 'Time of Remembrance', the 'Before' and the 'After'. The studies are mostly based on authentic documents, and the first-hand scientific bibliography represents a treasure trove of thought and research on the volume's topic. The original and sharp views of the authors refresh the historiography of what seems to be the very fruitful and even ever self-regenerating subject of the Time of Remembrance, to be endlessly maintained in order to prevent another Time of Terror. It also represents the true answer to the initial question: "what should we do to keep their memory alive?"

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Quotation: Raluca Lazarovici Vereş Review of Mihaela Gligor (ed.), *Memories of Terror. Essays on Recent Histories*, in: S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 8 (2021) 3, 98-102.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0321/REV_RLAZ01

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 8 (2021) 3 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121>

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In appreciation to the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) for supporting this publication.