

Book review

Slucki, David, Finder, Gabriel N. & Patt, Avinoam (eds.) (2020). *Laughter After: Humour and the Holocaust*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

The book *Laughter After: Humour and the Holocaust* is an interesting collection of articles that deal mainly with post-Holocaust humour in its various forms: jokes, cartoons, movies, TV series, stand-up shows and personal testimonies of survivors looking backwards at the humour made during the Holocaust.

There are many studies on humour in the Holocaust and each one makes an important contribution to a field that has been taboo for many years. In the last three decades, many studies have addressed the alternative approaches to Holocaust memory, especially the humorous artistic expressions of the Holocaust. However, the touch on the Holocaust in a humorous way was reflected in the cinema long before the studies dealing with the subject that appeared – see *The Great Dictator* by Charles Chaplin (1940); *To Be or Not to Be* by Ernst Lubitsch (1942). In the sixties, one can mention Mel Brooks' film *The Producers* (1968) – see this volume's article "A ring of fire: Humour and the Holocaust" by Stephen J. Whitfield – and his theatrical version from 2001. Another cinematic version was based on the theatrical performance of the same title in 2005. In 1972, Jerry Lewis, who starred in, directed, and co-wrote the concentration camp comedy *The Day the Clown Cried*. The film follows washed-up German clown Helmut Doork (Lewis) as he is imprisoned in a concentration camp for a routine making fun of the Führer. Once there, Doork entertains the children with his antics and is eventually forced to lead the children into the gas chambers. The film ends with Doork and the children laughing as gas fills the room. *The Day the Clown Cried* remains unreleased to this day. Another comic film regarding the Holocaust, *Life is Beautiful* (1997), was produced by Roberto Benigni.

What sets this book apart is the wide spread of the articles over a long period of time that begins even before the Holocaust – see "Is it still funny? Lin Jaldati and Yiddish satire before and after the Holocaust" by David Shneer – and continues to the present day – see "The last laugh" by Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards. The book provides a broad perspective on Holocaust Humor from different points of view not only of the researchers themselves, but also of the respondents, whether directly or indirectly through humorous products, which are first, second, and third generations of the Holocaust. Each period and each generation has its own relation to the Holocaust – see "Hitler hanging on the tree: Humour and violence in Soviet Yiddish folklore of World War II" by Anna Shternshis; "Too soon? Yiddish humour and the Holocaust in postwar Poland" by Marc Caplan; "'The Holocaust was the worst': Remembering the Holocaust through third-generation jokes" by Jordana Silverstein.

Another special approach of this book is that it contains a variety of articles that deal with Holocaust Humor in various countries such as US, Latin America, Israel, Poland, and Germany.

Similarities can be seen in the humorous reference to the Holocaust among various countries. This is when one takes into account that the articles focus on works created by Jews. Another interesting finding is the similar psychological processes that Holocaust survivors and the generations to come go through, no matter what country they live in. Dealing with the trauma

is not only on the personal level of the creators themselves, but on the collective level of Jews as a whole. After all, no work of art stands on its own if it does not have an audience that identifies with it – see “We’re safe here, but Poland is a state of mind: The exploitation of Holocaust consciousness in Jewish fiction and memoirs” by Jarrod Tanny; “I. B. Singer’s art of ghost writing in *Enemies, A Love Story*” by Jan Schwarz.

Selecting the articles for the book, the editors very wisely chose articles that dealt with humorous works that appealed also to the Gentiles, in order to create a comprehensive reference to the Holocaust by Jews and Gentiles – see “The image of Anne Frank: From universal hero to comic figure” by Liat Steir-Livny; “This way to the ovens, señoras y señores: Holocaust cartoons in Latin America” by Ilan Stavans; “I’m allowed, I’m a Jew: Oliver Polak and Jewish humour in contemporary Germany after the Holocaust” by Gabriel N. Finder.

The preoccupation with the Holocaust, and especially the humorous preoccupation, is a sensitive subject that was taboo for many years. The second and third generations are intensely exposed to documentary materials, whether it be documents, films or testimonies of Holocaust survivors and whether it is days of remembrance designed to strengthen the memory of the Holocaust so that it will not be forgotten and is passed down as an eternity from generation to generation. At some point, the second generation and especially the third generation, felt the need to process coping with the trauma of the Holocaust in a different way, through humour – see “Yad Vashem, you so fine! The place of the Shoah in contemporary Israeli and American comedy” by Avinoam Patt. Humour is known to be an important and effective intuitive means of dealing with difficulties and especially with severe traumas. The need did its thing, and so, the humorous works that dealt with the Holocaust were born, either as complete works or as part of works in various genres such as jokes, cartoons, movies, theatre performances, TV series, and stand-up shows. Despite this, because of the inherent need of many Jews to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, certainly in the second generation tightly connected to the first generation and the trauma of the Holocaust, there are doubts and questions: Have we not exaggerated the presentation of the Holocaust as expressed in witty works? Will it not harm the memory of the Holocaust? What will the Gentiles understand about the Holocaust if what they hear or see are humorous references to the Holocaust? Questions and doubts also arise from the articles presented in the book – see “Introduction: To tell jokes after Auschwitz is barbaric, isn’t it?” by David Slucki, Gabriel N. Finder, and Avinoam Patt and “Too soon? Yiddish humour and the Holocaust in postwar Poland” by Marc Caplan.

The book *Laughter After* is an important contribution, reflecting the psychological processes experienced by the first but especially the second and third generations of the Holocaust through the humorous works that aim to process the trauma of the Holocaust in alternative ways, but also as a means of preserving the memory of the Holocaust.

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