

## *Introduction*

*Alan Rosen*

As with most world literature, Holocaust literature has regularly invoked imagery of the heavenly bodies: the sun, the moon, and especially the stars. “Our eyes register the light of dead stars,” begins André Schwarz-Bart’s formidable 1959 Holocaust novel, *The Last of the Just*. Premised on the laws of light and optics, this opening sentence sets forth the novel’s memorial mandate: to bring before the reader’s (and narrator’s?) eyes the light that continues to radiate from the Holocaust’s no longer living victims.<sup>1</sup>

But stars have also held a special attraction for Holocaust literature because of the insignia, the Star of David, that Jews were forced to wear in order to set them apart from the general population. “Today two harsh decrees reached us. First, the Star of David decree,” writes Warsaw diarist Chaim Kaplan on November 30, 1939. Like many, Kaplan turned the decree inside out: with the prospect of the ‘Star of David’ insignia soon to be affixed not only to clothing but to Jewish businesses, he conjectures that “everywhere we turn we shall feel as if we were in a Jewish kingdom.” Strikingly, Kaplan concludes the star-burdened entry by pondering the role of the Jewish poet in a time of catastrophe: “A poet who clothes adversity in poetic form immortalizes it in an ever lasting monument.”<sup>2</sup> The *Cambridge Literature of the Holocaust* aims to pick up where Kaplan’s meditation left off, surveying how, during the war and in its aftermath, writers – some of whom were gifted poets, some journeyman diarists like Kaplan, and some merely children – clothed the ever-intensifying adversity in a stunning variety of literary forms.

The “adversity” – what we now call the Holocaust (or, in its Hebrew counterpart, the *Shoah*), the notorious attempt by Nazi Germany to destroy European Jewry – grew in its proportions as the months and years went on. Accelerated persecution of Jews began in Germany in 1933, encompassed Austria and Czechoslovakia in the late 1930s, and then, with the German invasion of Poland in September, 1939, expanded to Eastern Europe and, progressively, to all areas of Europe that came under German occupation.

The methods used differed from country to country. But they most always were accompanied by brutality and privation, and, in time, by exclusion (utilizing the Star of David insignia), plunder, deportation, and murder.

Arenas of terror invented to carry out this program came to dot the European landscape. First established in Germany in 1933, concentration camps dealt ruthlessly with many types of prisoners; Jews eventually came to form a major constituency. Once the war began in 1939, ghettos, which eventually numbered close to a thousand, soon were established to isolate the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe. Special work battalions and camps exploited the labor of the prisoners, whom Benjamin Ferencz called “less than slaves.” When, in 1941, Germany broke its treaty with the Soviet Union and invaded its former ally, it accompanied its invasion with mass executions of Russian, Ukrainian, and Baltic Jewries. Finally, the death camps operating in German-occupied Poland from late 1941 until 1945 were designed to murder large transports of Jews upon arrival. The transports from ghettos or communities to these camps were carried out mainly in cattle-cars under crowded and primitive conditions. The decimation of European Jewry unfolded largely parallel to the events of World War II. But, in contrast to the ugly hostilities waged between that war’s armed combatants, the Holocaust targeted civilians – Jewish men, women, and children – for enslavement, humiliation, and murder. This sad chronicle provides the setting, backdrop, and coordinates for much, if not all, of Holocaust literature.

History has played a dominant role in establishing the Holocaust’s factual and interpretive coordinates. This volume chronicles not the history of the Holocaust, but rather the wartime and postwar response in literature to the victims’ plight. Some of this literature was written by victims who eventually perished, some by the minority of victims who gratefully survived, and some either by contemporaries who, in Israel, England, the Americas, or elsewhere were not on the scene, or who were born after the events took place.

As this collection hopes to show, literature too has made its special contribution. A few words may be in order to suggest, even in a limited and foreshortened way, the specific vocation of literature in regard to the Holocaust. If history has sought objectivity, a dispassionate assemblage of the facts of when, where, and how the events unfolded, literature has been shamelessly subjective, offering ardently personal perspectives on what transpired. Emotion was not to be avoided, but rather intensified. In a related sense, if history has generally concerned itself with the macro level – the group, the institution, the movement – literature has focused on the individual. It is via the individual that empathy comes to the fore. The

difference appears again in the approach to language. History is measured by the transparency of its language, the degree to which the reader follows the chronicle of events without noticing the language in which they are rendered. Historian Saul Friedlander's *The Years of Extermination*, for example, provides a window on the events of this era, at its best when the window itself goes unnoticed. In contrast, literature aims to make the language conspicuous, to thicken it, as it were, and by doing so to make the reader aware of the means used to create the effect. At times figurative language – image, symbol, metaphor (“dead stars,” for example) – achieves this end. At other times, tone or voice, sarcasm or indignation, guide the reading: “A Jewish policeman? Oh, I can’t believe my eyes!” writes Peretz Opoczynski from the Warsaw ghetto in late 1941, addressing his fellow ghetto residents with, as David Roskies reminds us, a distinctly blended intonation borrowed from Yiddish storytelling at its finest.<sup>3</sup> History would rarely choose such a register to chronicle the ghetto’s immense deprivation. Or again, it is the prerogative of language to double back on itself. So Paul Celan’s eerily famous lines, “Black milk at daybreak we drink it at evening / we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night / we drink and we drink,” pivot around a compulsive act of drinking, senseless except in the quiet violence of the reiterated act.

Prose does this as well, with its own capacity to meditate on language’s tested powers in the midst of carnage. Hungarian survivor Elie Wiesel reports on a scene of selection at Auschwitz:

Every few yards, there stood an SS man, his machine gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the throng.  
 An SS came toward us wielding a club. He commanded:  
 “Men to the left! Women to the right!”

Up until this point, the memoir, like many before and many after, depicts the anguished moment of arrival in which families were torn apart. But then the author brings to the fore the role language plays:

Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight simple, short words. Yet that was the moment when I left my mother.<sup>4</sup>

Guns, clubs, commands: the tools of the enemy may wreak death and destruction on the remnants of Hungarian Jewry, but in Wiesel’s revisiting of this scene, an astonishingly few words cause the greatest damage. The enemy’s unexceptional words do not fade away. They are retrieved out of the past and put on display, so that the reader may appreciate their explosive force. The window thus clouds over, the words take on a heavy substance of

their own, and the reader engages with the events attentive to what Vilna ghetto poet Abraham Sutzkever called the “charred pearls,” the wounded words with which he formed his resilient poems.<sup>5</sup>

In truth, the line between history and literature need not be so sharply drawn (Alessandro Portelli and Eric Sundquist’s essays will delineate some of the fault lines). Indeed, the fruitful interplay between the two can be noted by the fact that the mission statement for the Warsaw ghetto chroniclers, including diarists and reportage, was set forth by a historian, Emanuel Ringelblum – who was himself guided by a previous generation’s determination to have individual Jews record the facts. As Ringelblum recognized and advocated, for the victim to unflinchingly record the facts in the appalling flux of ghetto life and death took a rare form of literary resolve.

History enters here through another door as well, since the *history of Holocaust literature* figures prominently in this collection. The volume’s first two essays, by David Roskies and David Patterson respectively, inaugurate this approach, making wartime writing a point of departure. Such a strategy might seem obvious. Yet it is not uncommon for surveys or critical studies of Holocaust literature to presume that the war years gave rise to little of any literary substance; from this vantage point, the real career of Holocaust literature took off in the postwar years, in the form of the memoirs written by former inmates of concentration camps. Indeed, a focus on the camps, the conditions of which allowed for little in the way of actual composition (though see Roskies on the Sonderkommandos and Gilbert on songs), posited the postwar years as a natural beginning for literary reflection and the memoir as the genre that set the standard.

But the war years actually yielded a bounty of writing in all genres, much of which was lost in the convulsive uprootings of wartime Europe. Yet a portion did survive. To be sure, literature authored in ghettos, in hiding, and under other circumstances of privation may demand its own hermeneutic, one that recognizes the fragmented, groping view of events that could not help but shape these productions. This recognition is stimulated by Roskies’ and Patterson’s inventories of these essential, and often essentially courageous, writings.

Most of the volume’s other essays, even while working independently, follow their lead. In some cases, they start from what Leona Toker precisely formulates as “the first literary record of the shocked realization of the nature of atrocities.” This realization did not always come directly, nor was the literary record necessarily straightforward. Indeed, oblique entry, what Sheila Jelen shrewdly refers to as “writing *around* the Holocaust,” was

often the order of the day. In other cases, the story of literary response to the Holocaust picks up in the early postwar period. Whether wartime or postwar, the starting point has been chosen in order to retrieve earlier responses, many of which have remained obscure. Decade by decade, the essays try to show the often devious route by which a Holocaust literature has unfolded (see, for instance, the contributions of Rita Horváth and Jeffrey Mehlman). This circuitous development obtained especially, but not only, in countries ruled for years by communist governments whose terms of engagement with the Holocaust were such that, as Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska notes, “the meanderings of state censorship created a situation in which certain topics appeared and disappeared.”

More generally, Holocaust literature’s terms of engagement have oscillated between two poles. On the one hand, it has angled for comparison, for something familiar, or familiar enough, for the reader who was not on the scene to latch onto, to enable, in Wiesel’s formulation, one who was (fortunately) *not* there to feel “as if” they had been.<sup>6</sup> “I saw a flood once in the mountains,” begins Rachel Auerbach, writing in the wake of the Great Deportation in Warsaw in the summer of 1942. The flood offers an analogy, a metaphor, a basis of comparison; it demonstrates the resolute search for terms. Yet even while stepping outside the actual sphere of the events, it delineates an approach to them: the “I saw” establishes a standard for chronicle, for description, for anguish, for assessment. The flood is not conjured; it is witnessed.<sup>7</sup>

But not every writer felt analogy even roughly suitable. The diary of the Polish physician Zygmunt Klukowski records a scene of plunder in the aftermath of an October 1942 roundup of Jews; the sense of scandal gathers momentum word by word, sentence by sentence:

From the wide-open Jewish apartments people grab everything they can lay their hands on. Shamelessly they carry loads of poor Jewish belongings or merchandise from the shops . . . Altogether the spectacle is unbelievable, hard to describe. Something equally terrifying, horrible, has never been seen or heard about, by anyone, anywhere.

To chronicle what is said to be without analogy, to be unprecedented and unparalleled – “never been seen or heard about, by anyone, anywhere” – has a riveting force of its own. In this case, the force is intensified because Dr. Klukowski is describing the violation not (or at least *not directly*) of people but of possessions. At the center of the debacle are the things that “people grab” and “carry” in a manner that dislodges them from the life of the Jews to whom they belonged.<sup>8</sup> If the spectacle of plundering “belongings or

merchandise” solicits such a level of rhetoric – and the internal poise of his description convinces me that it is fitting – one is hard put to imagine what could be said when the violation, as we know that it did, moves to (or *back to*) people. Holocaust literature oscillates between these poles, seeking analogies in nature (floods or dead stars) or history (previous catastrophes), while (often at the same time) detailing the failure to find them.

The chapters that follow survey a variety of literary responses to the Holocaust, subsuming individual writers within the larger patterns of national literatures, language groups, or specific kinds of writing. Yet this approach is meant to expand the repertoire of names, carving out a larger space for authors who have little notoriety outside of their specific time and place, together with those whose accomplishments have reached further. Of wartime writers, the only one who remains widely known is Anne Frank, the Dutch teenage diarist who perished in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and whose stature as a writer has become greater in recent years. But other wartime diarists – the above-mentioned Chaim Kaplan, Abraham Lewin, Victor Klemperer, Moshe Flinker – have also had increased exposure, as scholarly and popular awareness of contemporary responses to the plight of wartime Jewry has circulated more widely.

Certain postwar writers, survivors all, have pondered the Holocaust for decades on end, experimenting with a range of genres or inventing others to meet their needs. Elie Wiesel’s Yiddish memoir of his Hungarian family’s deportation in 1944, first published in 1956, details the illusion of well-being that dogged his community even after most of European Jewry had been murdered. But it focuses on the nurturing relationship developed by father and son as they together try to endure the rigors of Auschwitz, a winter death march to Germany, and the radical privations of Buchenwald. Relocating to the United States, he chose French as his main literary language and produced over the next decades essays, novels, memoirs, and plays, most of which have dealt with the survivor’s struggle in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Eventually, the struggle of the *children* of survivors has come to share center stage with that of the survivors. To foster an apt commemorative idiom, Wiesel has also invented a skeletal form that he refers to as “dialogues.” His writing shares features with the austere universe of the French existentialist writers, but it also draws deeply from the well of Jewish history and tradition, joining the angst of ethical dilemma with the world of Jewish learning, law, and mysticism.

Like Wiesel, Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish survivor who wrote about the Holocaust from multiple vantage points over a forty-year period, moved from a devastating memoir of deportation to Auschwitz to the more flexible

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realms of fiction, poetry, and essay, often relying, in Robert Gordon's words, on "oblique or metaphorical" entry, but ultimately choosing the essay form as a hybrid venue for testimonial ethics. Indeed, both Wiesel and Levi have been drawn to the essay as a supple means to fuse storytelling with ethical inquiry. Abraham Sutzkever penned his own memoir of the Vilna ghetto. But his particular achievement came in lyric poetry, first in the ghetto and then, after the war, continuing for some five decades in the very different surroundings of Tel Aviv. His hundreds of lyrics and prose poems have cultivated an unsentimental imagery and idiom of commemoration. As editor of the journal *The Golden Chain*, he also played a consummate mentoring role, creating a post-catastrophe venue for sophisticated Yiddish literature, a portion of which was dedicated to the Holocaust. His counterpart on the continent was Paul Celan, who, based from 1948 on in Paris, fashioned German lyric poetry into a rigorous, if elliptical, Holocaust vocabulary. His short prose meditations on the poetic vocation after the Holocaust revealed the deliberation that shaped his dark aesthetic and the Jewish Eastern European sensibility that underlies the verse steeped in contentious allusion to European letters. The demons of clinical depression drove him to suicide at the age of fifty, the merciless complement to a life lived in service to versifying the Holocaust.

Jorge Semprun and Charlotte Delbo, non-Jewish resistance fighters deported to Buchenwald and Auschwitz (then Ravensbrück) respectively, crafted innovative memoirs in French and continued in later writings to explore the nature of time, memory, and literature. Born and bred in Spain, Semprun's multiple postwar recountings of his Buchenwald internment not only stretch literary form but double back on themselves, challenging their perspective and the version of truth it implies. Delbo, for her part, angled between reportage, lyrical prose, and austere drama to commemorate the women with whom she was deported and to search for the pristine words to do so.

Rachel Auerbach, Vasily Grossman, Aharon Appelfeld, and Imre Kertész, writers who shaped the Holocaust's literary idiom in their respective countries and languages, receive attention in the essays that follow; other writers, such as the novelists Margo Minco from Holland and Danilo Kiš from Serbia, do not, which speaks not to their accomplishments but rather to the organizational constraints of a volume such as this.

"Blessed is [God]," writes Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz, a religious leader of the Munkacs community in prewar Hungary, "Who sent His angels to accompany me every single day. Even when little separated me from death, I was saved – and not by natural means."<sup>9</sup> Religious writing constitutes an



underrepresented domain of Holocaust literature. Most literary study of the Holocaust has favored the secular genres, presuming that only when traditional religious belief is absent or aborted can artistry flourish. But just as one would not think of early modern England without the martyrology of John Foxe, the sermons of John Donne, or the lyrics of the metaphysical poets, so did the response of many Jews come via traditional forms of religious writing. Like the English examples, they are no less literary for being so. Some emerged almost straight from the killing fields. Rabbi Shimon Huberband's chronicle of the war's first year, written in Warsaw shortly after the events unfolded, serves not only as an elegy to the Jews lost but also as a tribute to the indefatigable effort of Poland's religious Jews to persevere in their observance of tradition; the somewhat later incantatory report from the pen of Rabbi Moshe Rothenberg takes both elegy and tribute to another level of desperation. The Warsaw ghetto sermons of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, or the crisis-pitched Torah commentary of Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich, display the disciplined vehicle of religious preaching up against unfathomable cruelty.

Postwar religious responses – memoirs, poems, letters, essays, tales, and stories – have been equally dedicated to finding an idiom steeped in faith while sufficiently able to inventory the often inexhaustible list of losses. These traditional responses do not shy away from extracting from the welter of destruction meaningful lessons and from viewing the victims through the prism of sacrifice, martyrdom, and a call for divine vengeance. Indeed, the most basic unit of all Holocaust literary commemoration may be the synagogue memorial plaques formulaically listing the names of murdered family members, each of which is followed by the Hebrew abbreviation *י"ה*, “may God avenge his (or her) blood.” Above all, this literature, cataloging atrocity and defamation, nonetheless testifies to miraculous interventions at every fateful turn of the road. This rhetoric marches to a different drummer than most of the better-known examples of Holocaust literature. But to ignore it filters out the articulate sensibility of the devout that has fashioned its response through an ensemble of its own literary media.

Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Ladino, Italian, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, and of course, English: the languages in which the story of the Holocaust is told shape the story that emerges. This multilingual premise regarding Holocaust storytelling mirrors the social make-up of prewar Europe; the choice of language among European Jews was never neutral. The *lingua franca* of most of pre-World War II East and Central European Jewry was



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Yiddish, a fusion language originating among the Jews of Central Europe in the medieval period, blending German, Hebrew, and eventually Slavic, and written in Hebrew characters. It was transported east when Jews were driven out of those Central European lands. Groomed as a vital literary language in the nineteenth century, Yiddish served interwar Jewry as a language of learning, letters, politics, culture, and daily affairs. Yet its primacy in all these realms was challenged (or complemented) by a surge in the popularity of vernacular tongues, and also by the Zionist's resurrected claims for Hebrew.

The story of Ladino runs along a parallel track. Spoken by the Jews of medieval Spain, peppered with Hebrew and Aramaic words, written in its own particular nuance of Hebrew characters, Ladino traveled with fifteenth-century Spain's expelled Jews to places of refuge in the Balkans, Turkey, Palestine, and North Africa. The language became a portable homeland in these lands of expulsion, binding descendants of refugees together centuries later. Ladino remained the lingua franca in some communities, such as Salonika, in the twentieth century, and, as Judith Roumani recounts, nurtured a legacy of its own literary forms.

During the Holocaust, contention over languages intensified: idealistic calls for a return to Jewish languages competed with realistic defections to the vernacular. Speaking a flawless German, Polish, or Ukrainian could help one escape the persecutor's net. In the main arenas of terror, Jews forged their own tongues: coded communication in the ghetto, a fabricated jargon in the camps. For some, the choice of a language to write in was a choice of a universe of meaning. So Moshe Flinker, hiding with his sizable religious family in Brussels and pining for a future as a diplomat in Israel, penned the bulk of his diary in Hebrew, occasionally turned to his native Dutch, and filled the back pages with Arabic grammar exercises. In Lodz, another youthful diarist – whose name and fate remain unknown – was less ideologically wed to any specific tongue but rather shuttled to and fro among four: Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, and English.<sup>10</sup> Other writers chose a language of composition – and then felt called upon to choose again, the rapidly changing circumstances compelling them to switch from one language to another. When the Great Deportation of Warsaw Jewry to Treblinka began in summer 1942, diarist Abraham Lewin exchanged Yiddish for Hebrew; poet Yitzhak Katzenelson did the same when penning his elegy to this devastation; and chronicler Rachel Auerbach traded Polish for Yiddish. Such changes attest to facility and diglossia, the ability to maneuver in more than one tongue, and the changing need to do so in the tongue that mattered most. The shift to a different tongue at a decisive

moment may also have sent a signal (to them? to us?), a pointed recognition of watershed events that demanded a new (or, in the case of Hebrew, an ancient) constellation of meaning.

In the war's aftermath, language continued to be marked by these wartime struggles. A certain swath of English-language Holocaust literature comprises, as Lillian Kremer reminds us, "a tapestry of autobiographical writing by refugees and survivors who have abandoned their birth languages." Some abandoned, yet others, as Jan Schwarz details persuasively, cleaved to what had been intimately owned since their earliest days. Chava Rosenfarb's weary assessment catches the postwar tone unnervingly well: "If writing is a lonely profession, the Yiddish writer's loneliness has an additional dimension. His readership has perished. His language has gone up with the smoke of the crematoria."<sup>11</sup> But not entirely. Rosenfarb, Sutzkever, and other Eastern European Jews refused to heed the writing on the wall and continued to ply their lonely trade in Yiddish, widening its tonality to try to accommodate even the Holocaust's vast losses. Others refused in a different fashion, as Stuart Taberner sketches in relation to postwar German literature, to let the enemy set the linguistic terms. So Paul Celan, carrying from his native Czernowitz a quiver of languages, chiseled his ever-diminishing poems in German, not granting the perpetrators the possibility of forcing him to abandon his mother tongue but rather crafting it to sing in a voice precisely counter to theirs. Still others opted for an adopted tongue, either to establish a buffer between the war's devastating events and their recollection of them, or to recruit a specific tongue to better probe the Holocaust's overwhelming legacy – or both. Thus, Elie Wiesel has said that French provided him with a "refuge" – but he also believed it offered the challenge of addressing the Holocaust, the most irrational event, in French, the most rational of languages, the heir of Cartesian philosophy. For Wiesel, the collision of the irrational with the rational sculpted an appropriate idiom of Holocaust witness.<sup>12</sup>

France itself was only a temporary refuge for Yiddish poet Yitzhak Katzenelson, who in 1944 sought the proper terms to gauge the disappearance of Eastern European Jewry. "Rising over Lithuanian or Polish towns," he wrote in the final canto of his epic poem, *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People*, "the sun will never find / A radiant old Jew at the window reciting Psalms."<sup>13</sup> The light of dead stars and the unrequited rays of an ever-seeking sun are necessarily the lamps by which we read Holocaust literature. The volume's essays endeavor to guide us both in what to read and how to go about doing it.