

The Ethics of Witnessing: The Holocaust in Polish Writers' Diaries from Warsaw, 1939–1945. By Rachel Feldhay Brenner. Cultural Expressions of World War II. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014. xvi, 198 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$79.95, hard cover.

This thought-provoking book about Polish writers' wartime diaries raises many important questions about the moral impact of witnessing mass murder, the fraught and complex relationships between certain Polish writers and Jews and the ethical and literary implications of writing diaries—meant for eventual publication—in a time of barbarism and moral collapse.

Rachel Feldhay Brenner presents a rich and multi-layered analysis that underscores the contradictions, inconsistencies and struggles experienced by Polish writers before, during and after the war as they sorted out their often ambivalent feelings towards Jews, their reactions to the Holocaust, and their subsequent attempts to understand their own behavior and the reactions of their compatriots. The writers chosen by Feldhay Brenner—Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Maria Dąbrowska, Aurelia Wyleżyńska, Zofia Nałkowska and Stanisław Rembek—present fascinating case studies, full of surprises and startling shifts in attitudes. Nothing is simple and straightforward. Courageous help to Jews goes hand in hand with attitudes that, by modern day standards, would be labeled antisemitic. Aurelia Wyleżyńska, who at great personal risk helped her Jewish friends, confessed in her diary to guilty but honest feelings of resentment and anger and even involuntary revulsion at her helpless and terror-stricken charges. The guilt, she realized, stemmed in part from her realization that the Germans had succeeded in making hunted Jews seem more like frightened animals than like fellow human beings. And thus Hitler gained a kind of victory, even over people like her. But this was honesty, not antisemitism, a reflection of the deep sense of responsibility she felt to chart the shattering confrontation of the humanist liberal values that had nurtured her with the wartime reality that mocked her pre war intellectual and moral anchors.

The first chapter, “The Holocaust and the Problem of Empathy: Polish Christian Diarists look at the Ghetto,” goes beyond the immediate wartime experience to develop a brilliant discussion of the ethical implications of the diary as a genre. Diaries, Feldhay Brenner argues, were derived from the French *journal intime* and were rooted in Enlightenment assumptions about empathy and about a new modern society as “a congregation of fellow human beings” based on shared values, intellectual autonomy and common moral concerns (9). The writers studied in this book largely shared these Enlightenment assumptions which for some, like Dąbrowska and Rembek, were refracted through the prism of a belief in a special Polish mission to humanity. This ardent Polish patriotism, rooted in Romantic traditions, often went hand in hand with a universalistic humanism that legitimized Poland's ongoing struggle for independence and security as a battle “for our independence and yours.” On the other hand, that same patriotism could also justify a xenophobic suspicion of the “Other,” especially Jews and even of those Jews who regarded themselves as fervent Polish patriots. This was true of Dąbrowska, and, for a time, Rembek.

What happened, then, to this faith in humanism, western values and Poland's unique moral destiny when these diarists came face to face with the German mass murder of the Jews and with the incontrovertible evidence that many of their countrymen looked on with varying degrees of indifference or in many cases, even helped kill Jews themselves?

The very beginning of the book jolts the reader into the disquieting implications of witnessing. Feldhay Brenner compares the reactions of two well-known writers to the burning Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943. Iwaszkiewicz, who would gain recognition as a Righteous Gentile by Yad Vashem, registered anguish and empathy. At the same

time, Iwaszkiewicz's fellow writer, Maria Dąbrowska, widely respected for her public criticism of antisemitism in Polish universities in the late 1930s, reacted with callous indifference. Dąbrowska saw Polish-Jewish relations as a zero-sum game, and even after the murder of millions of Polish Jews, expressed resentment about Jewish communists and about the Jews' seeming obsession with their own suffering.

Another fascinating example analyzed by Feldhay Brenner is the case of Stanisław Rembek, who before the war was an ardent Polish patriot and admirer of Polish military valor. Rembek's wartime diary, like Dąbrowska's, showed little interest in the Jewish tragedy. But Rembek clearly experienced a stunning transformation after the war. In the *Sentence of Franciszek Kłos*, Rembek condemned the moral corruption of wartime Polish society and the involvement of many Poles in the denunciation and killing of Jews. The war caused him to rethink his previous assumptions about his compatriots and his own reactions to the mass murder that he witnessed.

One of the most engrossing chapters discusses Zofia Nałkowska, who wrote, on May 14, 1943 that "the drowning [Jews] who are pulling me into the abyss, still linger close by. The suffering of others has become more acute, more intense than one's own. Why am I tormenting myself? Why am I ashamed to live? Why am I unable to bear it?" (101). Nałkowska was haunted by the disparity between the horror that she saw and the seeming futility of finding the right language to describe it. In 1946 Nałkowska published an important collection of short stories, *Medallions*, based on testimony she had heard as vice-president of the Main Commission for investigating German War Crimes in Poland. This became one of the earliest, and most important examples, of what would subsequently become "Holocaust literature." Feldhay Brenner ends this challenging and important book with an important insight about the connection between these wartime diaries and present day attempts to discuss the Holocaust: "The spectrum of the struggles with the reality of the Holocaust that the five diaries represent provides an invaluable lesson about the nature of witnessing. The variety of responses to Jewish suffering—from Dąbrowska's deliberate dismissal, to Rembek's willful belittling, which he corrected in his postwar *Sentence*, to Iwaszkiewicz's altruistic dedication and humanistic despair, to Wyleżyńska altruistic moral self-correction, to Nałkowska's traumatic silence which she broke in her post-war *Medallions*—teach the complexity and variability of responses to another's plight. . . . It brings to the fore the injunction of moral self-examination on the present-day witness of present-day atrocities . . . (170)."

This is an excellent book that deserves to be widely read.

SAMUEL KASSOW
Trinity College

The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police. By anonymous members of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police. Trans., ed. Samuel Schalkowsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. xx, 389 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Figures. Tables. Maps. \$35.00, hard bound.

Post-war testimony and memoirs by members of the Jewish ghetto police are rare, because few survived and even fewer were eager to speak or write about the controversial and most often deprecated role they had played in the life of the ghettos. Contemporary reports written by ghetto policemen are even rarer. For this reason alone, the report of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police would be a special document. But it is more than that. The detailed content as well as the analytical and critical quality of the report, combined with the superb introduction by Samuel D. Kassow, make this book a landmark of Holocaust historiography.