

Ronald BERGER, *Constructing a Collective Memory of the Holocaust: A Life History of Two Brothers' Survival*, (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1995, 162 p.); Yosef Hayim YERUSHALMI, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996.)

*Zachor*, the imperative Biblical Hebrew command to “Remember!”, might appear a redundant injunction regarding the Holocaust. The Nazis generated meticulous records of their systematic destruction of European Jewry. Museums, popular and documentary films, literary and scholarly writings, all preserve and propagate memories of the Holocaust. How could one forget? How could one deny? But denial persists, and so too does the spectre of forgetting. Thus the importance of *zachor*, of creating and sharing collective memory.

Berger and Yerushalmi examine the issue of Jewish collective memory from two distinct perspectives. Yerushalmi addresses the entire scope of Jewish history, seeking to understand the relationship between Jewish historiography and Jewish memory over the course of millennia. Berger focuses on a restricted period in the lives of two men during the Second World War. These separate strands converge to define basic themes of Jewish memory and meaning.

Berger chronicles the saga of the survival of two young Polish-Jewish men in war-torn Europe. The brothers, separated during the Nazi occupation of Poland, followed radically different paths to survival; one in the death camps, and the other as a “Christian”, a partisan, and a Soviet soldier. They are not random subjects of investigation: the author presents the oral histories of his father and uncle. Berger taped these stories to remedy his own ignorance of the Holocaust, an ignorance born of the prevailing post-war reticence to tell North American Jewish children of the European

disaster. I can remember, as a child in the late 1950s, innocently inquiring why some of my playmates' parents had numbers tattooed on their arms: the yet-to-be-named Holocaust was not mentioned at the dinner table or in the religious school.

Eschewing the physiological approaches that dominate Holocaust studies, Berger analyzes the life histories of his father and brother through a sociological prism. He seeks some understanding of why and how they survived by exploring a central problem of social theory: the relationship and interplay between human agency (will, desire, ability) and social structure (institutions). This problem, and the interactionist approach he employs to illuminate it, emerged during the course of his research. He concludes his analysis with a critique of the politics of victimization, and a stinging attack on postmodern thought that would deconstruct, and ultimately deny, a coherent representation and interpretation of the Holocaust.

Yerushalmi works on a broader canvas in his examination of meaning in history, memory, and the writing of history. He makes clear from the outset that the search for meaning and the writing of historiography are not to be equated. Indeed, one has generally precluded the other in Jewish history. He begins by showing how the specificity of biblical narrative gave way to a rabbinical view of history set out of time: the search for, and interpretation of, the revealed pattern of the whole of history prevailed over chronology, the recording and sequencing of events. What was important for the Jewish people had already happened: and the meaning of what later happened to the Jewish people, if it was important, was derived from revealed history. Thus, there was little Jewish historiography during the Middle Ages: rituals of remembrance were expanded to incorporate new tragedies as reoccurrences of the past. The collective memories evoked by these rituals and liturgies served to identify and tie the community to its past.

For some, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain represented a disaster whose magnitude could not be encapsulated in previous explanatory modes: traditional religious forms of meaning failed, and the Expulsion engendered a brief spurt of Jewish historiography in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The movement was short-lived as Jewish communities struggled to retain traditional attitudes towards history, and found more satisfactory meaning for the collective memory in metahistorical myth, the growth and development of Jewish mysticism. Jewish historiography did not thrive until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Emancipation, the Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), the erosion of ties

to tightly knit communities, all led to the secularization of Jewish history for specific purposes. Yerushalmi sees Jewish historiography as divorced from, and in opposition to, Jewish collective memory. Jews now face the choice of what kind of past to have, a choice made more urgent by the Holocaust. For Yerushalmi, Jews stand at the same juncture now after the Holocaust as they did after the Expulsion. Will the Holocaust be treated as myth, as was the Expulsion? Or will it be treated as history, collectivized and internalized as memory? Can the Holocaust be encapsulated, by historians or novelists, in the traditional forms of meaning? Or will the search for meaning of the Holocaust be found elsewhere? Only time will tell.

More than a direct or indirect concern with the Holocaust unites these two books. Both authors are unabashedly personal in their choice of subject matter, approach, and voice. They are part of their work, and they recognize this. Identifying themselves as part of the subject matter of their own studies does not obscure or detract from the value and the contribution of their work. Rather, it brings the reader to confront a fundamental paradox: collective memory, if it is to persist as memory, must be intensely personal. To survive as the memory of the people, remembrance must be internalized by every individual, held as if it was personal property, personal history. Berger's search for his family's history exemplifies Yerushalmi's concern for a people: *Zachor*, Remember!

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