# Meaning in the Aftermath

*Out of the Whirlwind*: A Reader of Holocaust Literature. ed. Albert Friedlander. Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 536 pp.

by Ruth Elbaum

*And Abraham drew near and said: Wilt thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? . . . shalt not the Judge of all the earth do justly?*

Genesis 18:23

*The first ones destroyed were the children . . .*
*the first were they detained for death*
*the first into the wagons of slaughter;*
*they were thrown into the wagons, the huge wagons,*
*like heaps of refuse, like the ashes of the earth —*
*and they transported them,*
*killed them*
*exterminated them*
*without remnant or remembrance . . .*
*The best of my children were all wiped out!*
*Oh woe unto me —*
*Doom and Desolation!*

from "the First Ones"
by Yitzhak Katznelson in
*The Flame and the Fury*,
reprinted in
*Out of the Whirlwind*

Finding the beautiful, significant quotes is not difficult. Juxtaposing them to suggest the agonizing unreality of the Holocaust and the questions it raises is not difficult. "God made man because he loves stories" — but telling the story is much more demanding. It calls for a structure, some coherence, tentative direction, and the difficult task of resolution. The supreme challenge to the contemporary European Jewish writer, such as novelists Andre Schwarz-Bart and Elie Wiesel; and poets Uri Zvi Greenberg and Nellie Sachs, is to assume this responsibility to be "messenger of the dead." For these writers, the Holocaust was not just another tragedy among tragedies: its implication for the nature of man and the nature of God, its significance for the name "Jew" and the future of the Jewish people are uniquely profound.

Ruth Elbaum *is a student at Radcliff College.*



In his introductory quotation to *Last of the Just* from "The Obsequies" by M. Jaztrun, Schwarz-Bart first suggests the differentiating characteristic of the Nazi slaughter:

*. . . How may I mark your obsequies,*
*Vagabond handful of ashes*
*Between heaven and earth?*

It is this image of ashes and smoke which will pervade his novel as it in fact is permeating and poisoning the world:

*O the chimneys*
*Oh the ingeniously devised habitations of death*
*When Israel's body drifted as smoke*
*Through the air —*
*Was welcomed by a star, a chimney sweep,*
*A star that turned black*
*Or was it a ray of sun?*

from "O, the Chimneys"
by Nellie Sachs

For the first time in a history of Jewish tragedies, the Jews are not killed as human beings — not for having killed Christ, not for clinging to their ethnic-religious peculiarities, not for exploiting the peasants — but they are burned for the crime of existence. To be martyred at the stake in a Christian public square or clubbed to death in a pogrom are terrible, but human fates. In World War II, Jews were gassed en masse like swarms of exterminated insects and then burned like garbage. They were reduced to animals, to vermin, to inanimate objects, then to nothingness.

"For the first time in the history of Jewish tragedies, the Jews are not killed as human beings . . . but they are burned for the crime of existence."

In this sadistically absurd world of Nazi Germany where mad, antiseptic Germans force the Jews to take a bath every time they enter a new camp which they have already demonically soiled, resistance takes strange forms. During the middle years of the 1930's, considerable numbers of Jewish children committed suicide. As the concentration camp is described in *Night*, just to survive despite the Nazi torture was a kind of resistance. But mass uprisings like the revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto or at Treblinka were rare. The usual explanation offered is that the Jews had been so defeated that they had neither the physical nor the psychic energy to resist. There were few suicides in the camps, because both suicide and aggressive resistance are acts of the human will, and the Jews had no will left.

Schwarz-Bart offers two additional insights. First, he portrays Jewish

history as a series of expulsions and pogroms. When the situation in Germany first looked bad, when communities were warned by messengers who had escaped from the camps, the Jews neither fought back nor fled. They had become conditioned to expect tragedies, and also to expect to outlive them. They had no experience with a "final solution."

As the Jews were herded on to the trains, they preferred to believe that they were headed for Pichipoi to be reunited with their missing relatives or that the Allied invasion would soon save them. Resistance could only have developed if they faced the facts of their situation. But perhaps even if they had accepted the truth of their destiny, and denied the faith in an imminent redemption, the truth would not have led to revolt but rather to madness. To recognize his fate as an anonymous wisp of smoke and part of an enormous ashpile would be to glimpse, what no mortal could bear: the full horror of the insane world in which the Jew suddenly found himself.

---

**"To recognize his fate as an anonymous wisp of smoke would be to glimpse . . . the full horror of the insane world in which the Jew suddenly found himself."**

---

How do *we* live with the knowledge of the Horror? Any modern theology or philosophy must cope with the facts of the Holocaust, any Jewish philosophy must also fully accept the weariness, the physical and spiritual weakness of the Jewish people. Schwarz-Bart appeals with "bloody tears of pity":

> *O Lord, we went forth like this thousands of years ago. We walked across arid deserts and the blood-red Red Sea in a flood of salt, bitter tears. We are very old. We are still walking. Oh, let us arrive finally!*

Nelly Sachs describes the remnants of Israel:

> *We, the rescued,*
> *The worms of fear still feed on us.*
> *Our constellation is buried in dust.*
> *We, the rescued,*
> *Beg you:*
> *Show us your sun, but gradually.*
> *Lead us from star to star, step by step.*
> *Be gentle when you teach us to live again.*

Uri Zvi Greenberg uses the character of Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, the Hasidic Rebbe who traditionally pleads the case of Israel before the Almighty. In "B'ketz hadrachim," Greenberg puts the choice before God: either he recognizes the hell through which he has put the Jews and guarantees them peace and security, or He must admit that there is no order in the world, no meaning to the blood and death.



Greenberg finds his answer, his own comfort for the future, in a fervent Zionism and devotion to the rebirth of the State of Israel. His wrestling with God is a gesture of defiance, a search for assurance. What he is most actively seeking and himself heralding is a new *attitude* of Jewish strength, best realized in a Jewish state, a nation among nations.

The image of the strong, proud Israeli defending his land is one to contrast with the gentle, suffering East European Jew who was so easily destroyed. Andre Schwarz-Bart has a different response. As his Just Men assume the suffering of the world, they are at once the honored men and the victims. Similarly, the Jews are God's Chosen People and the humble, good lambs of suffering for the rest of the nations. This is a sometimes-Christian approach to the role of the Jews and a very dangerous one. Schwarz-Bart implies the crucial need for a different image for the individual Jew, so that the "humble procession" to the death camp is never repeated.

He sees the only possible human resistance to filth and insanity as the small gesture of loyalty to a personal commitment. The meaning of Jewish existence must not be to suffer, and therefore Ernie can not suffer *for* anyone. In the end, he chooses an earlier death to suffer *with* Golda. Schwarz-rt barely mentions Israel, and his struggle for an understanding of God is far less crucial and tormenting than it is for Wiesel. What hope there is for man today, Schwarz-Bart emphasizes, must lie in recognizing the divine nature of love and man's profound responsibility for his relationships.

The most difficult insights to even start to discuss are those of Wiesel. He is the most eloquent, the most piercing spokesman for the victims of the Holocaust and for the generations who must face the questions raised by the Holocaust. While Schwarz-Bart was born in France with a minimal Jewish background, Wiesel grew up in Eastern Europe steeped in Jewish tradition. Wiesel is the Hasidic scholar and haunting mystic that Schwarz-Bart is not. In *The Accident,* Kalman, the mystic, is recalled as explaining how God needs man to be ONE. For Wiesel, there is more hope expressed in that need of God for man, than in the strength of human love. For although Wiesel cries out in anger against God who murders and rapes His people, he can not dismiss him. His characters are in anguish to understand the human emotions, expressions, reactions of the people around them and of themselves, to scrutinize their conceptions of God and of the world and to reconcile them with the historic events. They neither find real comprehension nor assert an absolute meaninglessness. But how can such an irrational, inhuman experience allow for perfect consistencies or logical explanations?

A fine introduction to the general concern of Holocaust literature has been provided by Albert Friedlander in *Out of the Whirlwind, A Reader of Holocaust Literature.*

As an anthology, the book is comprehensive and well-arranged for an intensive and clear presentation. Friedlander includes over thirty selected chapters from the most interesting and best-documented works of historians, theologians, sociologists, novelists, and young victims writing on the *Shoah*. The balance is crucial and carefully maintained among the rational, emotional, philosophical, and moral approaches to the situations and implications of the Holocaust. Another equally important balance is kept by juxtaposing conflicting essays of rational justification or explanation. Considering the question of Jewish resistance, for example, there is an article by Bruno Bettelheim blaming the Jews for their passivity, followed by an article by Alexander Donat which criticizes the position of Bettelheim.

---

**"How do we live with the knowledge of the horror? We have listened to the story and now we share in the responsibility."**

---

The organization of articles into sections is significant because it establishes a logical structure and direction, but it also subtly makes the treatment of the subject too neat. The various pieces find their particular place within the framework according to their chronological or thematic reference. Friedlander has written moving introductions to each section which more strongly hold the book together and save it from being a collection of essays on the same broad topic. As a source book to inspire further reading of complete works by the represented authors, *Out of the Whirlwind* is ideal.

But, as we have seen, even the complete works contain no ultimate answers. As Michael says in Wiesel's *Town Beyond the Wall*.

> *The essence of man is to be a question, and the essence of the question is to be without answers.*

We especially, who grew up with the State of Israel and did not live through the damned days of World War II, must not stop asking the questions. The Church bells ring in Greenberg's poem and the bells of Auschwitz ring in *Night*. It is an event of the past that is very much a part of our present consciousness. The Epilogue in *Out of the Whirlwind* is a beautifully moving parable of Second Kings, Chapter Two, relating the Redemption of the Messianic Era to the people's acceptance of the prophet Elisha, and of the loss of Elijah. It ends:

> *They (we) must experience the terrible grief and loss. They must cry for the past turned to fire, for the future become ashes. Etched into their vision there must be the flaming path arching up into darkness. And from their lips, with reluctance and anguish, words must rise to form the threshold of the golden ladder:*
>
> *Yitgadal, v'yitkadash shmey rabba . . .*

We have listened to the story and now we share in the responsibility.



# The Jew as Conqueror: The Hearts and Minds of Soldiers in the Six-Day War

| *Siah Lohamim* (Discussions with the Soldiers) K'vutsat Haverim Tse'irim Mehat'nuah Hakibutsi, 283 pp. |
| --- |

by Mark Braverman

In English, *Siah Lohamim* would probably be rendered "Discussions with Soldiers," a title which serves to introduce the format of the book: a collection of interviews and panel-type discussions held in kibbutzim about two months after the 1967 Israeli-Arab war. The Hebrew, however, unusually rich in nuance, serves as a much better introduction to the contents. *Siah* can mean prayer, affliction, worries, contention in diversity. The prayers and anxieties of soldiers emerge as all these things at one time or another, and the advantage of the format is that the reader, as witness to the discussions, develops an affinity to many of the sentiments expressed.

The more than fifty or so interviews of three or four participants were conducted in the summer of 1967 in widely scattered kibbutzim. These interviews were published by a "group of young members (***haverim ts'eerim***) of the Kibbutz movement." (The first publication, in October 1967, was halted and the second and third publications underwent some minimal censorship. I have the third edition.) Short essays and poems are scattered throughout. The language is of the spoken sort, with an abundance of elipses, dashes, repetitions and incomplete sentences. It takes a bit of getting used to, but, that done, the flavor of Israeli speech (those anglicisms!) and manner comes through with wonderful directness, and the sometimes painful struggles with paradoxes and emotions are recorded with often jarring immediacy. More or less unedited, the discussions often focus on a single problem and then either veer off sharply to another topic or disintegrate disappointingly. Often the discussants seem to be on the verge of some great discovery of Jewish identity when someone is allowed to bring up a

---

Mark Braverman *is an undergraduate at Columbia College.*