

Recovered Memories

February 10th, 1997

Leonard Fein

This is suddenly the season for recovered memories. The most immediately poignant is Secretary of State Madeline Albright's, whose intimate story has occasioned flagons of wasted ink. For in the end, what is there to say of her discovery that goes beyond an expression of empathy for the discombobulating shock she (and, presumably, her children) have experienced?

Save that in her evidently unexpected collision with a past that veers sharply from the past she'd believed her own, she is in ample company. The Swiss and the Swedes, the Dutch and the French -- suddenly, as if a statute of limitations were about to expire, everyone claims to be seeking the truth. And, unlike the truths -- or are they merely induced imaginings? -- that victims of early childhood abuse now and then claim to have unexpectedly disinterred, these Holocaust related truths can be uncovered not through hypnosis but through painstaking evidentiary reconstruction.

Secretary Albright's case is, of course, entirely different from these national truth-searchings. There is no disgrace in her story. She may lament that her parents did not share with her the truth of what had happened and of what they did, but what they did had ample precedent and only the arrogant would second-guess their choice. In any event, it was their choice, not hers. She is who she is -- a believing Christian three of whose grandparents were murdered by the Nazis. Were she an obscure private person, she might be disposed to explore her newly discovered roots. In her current position, she will likely feel constrained from doing that given the publicity that would surely follow. All that is really left is for the rest of us to let the matter rest, to provide her a zone of privacy to deal as she chooses to with what she has now learned.

In the public realm, where the search is not for the personal biography but for the national history, the seekers have a rather different burden. Their search is not for the details of how their grandparents were murdered but for the details of how their grandparents and parents committed

murderer. And so we have in store for us yet another wave of Holocaust literature, to be added to the still-expanding shelves filled with memoirs (e.g., *Fragments*), to the still-growing analyses (e.g., Goldhagen, Friedlander), to the continuing debate regarding America's role. All this just a moment after many of us had been saying that the impact of the Holocaust was winding down.

We must be pleased that there will be an accounting, a reckoning. We deserve it, future generations deserve it, most of all the heirs of the perpetrators deserve it. At the same time, we must also hope that we have reached the stage where the new information will not refresh our continuing sense of victimhood. In recent years, that sense has begun to wane, and that is all to the good. Without for a moment diminishing the awesomeness of what our people experienced, of what was visited upon us, it does us harm to perceive ourselves -- worse yet, to seek to be perceived by others -- as victims. Our claim on the world's attention and on the attention of our own children does not derive from Auschwitz. It derives, instead, from Sinai, and from our continuing witness to what happened there.

Some of us struggle against that perception. In the world as we know it, one gets more points for having been unjustly punished than for bearing a powerful moral message. Moreover, we can claim Sinai only as we live Sinai, only as we live its message, and it is by no means easy to live it, even for those of us who accept it as metaphor rather than as actuality.

The history of the Holocaust was inflicted upon us. The history of the Exodus and of Sinai is the history we chose. If and as we renew that choice, with all its weight, with all its claims, we shall be able to keep all these new and decidedly lower case revelations in proper perspective.