

Rena Molho, *The Holocaust of the Greek Jews: Studies of History and Memory*.

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Book Review

Rena Molho's book, *The Holocaust of the Greek Jews: Studies of History and Memory*, is one of the most important texts on the Holocaust in Greece. It is a collection of twelve previously published pieces of Molho's writing, including academic articles, contributions to collective works, and book reviews. This is not conventional historiographic research; Rena Molho is concerned with the construction of memory of Holocaust-related events at institutional and non-institutional levels. Combining contemporary bibliography, primary sources and testimonies by Jews and non-Jews, she uses interpretive approaches, deconstructs national myths, and poses crucial questions. Why did the Holocaust of the Greek Jews take such a long time to become integrated into official national memory, considering the fact that Greece suffered great losses during the implementation of the "Final Solution" (87%, i.e., among the highest in Europe)? What part did antisemitism play in the extermination of the Greek Jews and the post-war oblivion of this fact? What part did the exploitation of Jewish properties play? How is the destruction of the Greek Jewish communities interpreted by official institutions and by the people who witnessed the events? What do contemporary Greeks (e.g. students) know about the Holocaust, and how is this knowledge governed by an official politics of memory?

Rena Molho has played a major role in the emergence of Jewish history and the Holocaust as objects of study in Greece. Being a child of survivors herself, she grew up in Thessaloniki, in a Jewish community deeply affected by the consequences of

the Holocaust; a city which lost almost all of its Jewish population, and preferred to forget about it, thus committing a “memorycide.” After a short description of the cultural and ethnic cleansing that took place in Thessaloniki from the integration of the city into the Greek state (1912) until the Second World War, she says in the introduction: “From the moment I realized it, to restore the historical memory of the exterminated-and-absent-from-the-history-of-the-city Salonikans, became a personal matter for me.” Along with having conducted important historiographical research on the Jewish community of Thessaloniki from the nineteenth century to the interwar years and the Second World War, Molho has played a leading role in the integration of the Greek case in international programs collecting Holocaust testimonies. She has coordinated such programs in Greece, conducting many of the interviews herself. In addition, she was the first historian to teach Jewish history in a Greek university, in 2000. She has also participated in organizing seminars for teachers of primary and secondary schools. These activities have made her an expert in this type of research and in knowledge of the topic.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, “History and memory,” focuses mainly on the case of Thessaloniki. The first chapter is a short review of the recent literature on the Holocaust in Greece, while the following chapters focus mainly on the case of Thessaloniki. More specifically, she records the main events from the beginning of the German occupation until the deportation of the Jewish population, and describes the enormous difficulties that survivors faced upon their return, focusing on the issue of reclamation of properties. In the fifth chapter, after a description of the impact that the Holocaust had on her as a child of survivors, she gives a short historical review of the creation of extermination camps, and proceeds with describing the methods implemented in them (tortures, killings, experiments). At the end of this chapter, the author discusses the mistrust shown to the survivors’ narratives when they came to describe their suffering, the inability of the tribunals to comprehend the distinctiveness of the Jewish genocide, the Allies’ stance, and the consequences of equating the Nazi crimes with the contemporary politics of the Israeli state towards Palestinians (on the latter, see footnote 266).

The second part of the book, “Published sources and books,” opens with a constructive critique of the purposes and methods adopted by official Holocaust education in Greece. The seventh chapter is a review of Christoph Schminck-Gustavus’ book on the German and Italian occupations in Ioannina, and the destruction of the local Jewish community. The eighth chapter is devoted to Manthos Crispis and his theatrical plays during the 1960s. Molho shows how his work is imbued by his past experiences as a hidden and persecuted Jew, and how Greek drama critics of that time produced superficial interpretations that misrepresented his plays. The ninth chapter is devoted to the extermination of the Jews in the Bulgarian zone. It begins with a review of the Greek edition (2013) of Natan Grinberg’s book, which collected evidence on the Bulgarian officials with leading roles in the extermination of Jews in Yugoslavia, Pirin, and the Bulgarian occupation zone in Greece. Molho takes the opportunity to cite a Bulgarian soldier’s letter published in a Bulgarian newspaper in 2000. This letter is an eye-witness account of the arrest and deportation of the Jews from Kavala, and it reveals the sentiments of the Bulgarian soldiers who were forced to participate in the procedure, without being informed in advance.

The last part of the book discusses projects which have collected Holocaust-related oral testimonies,

including the Greek case; usually this was thanks to Rena Molho's initiatives. The tenth chapter is concerned with the Shoah Foundation Institute's Visual History Archive; the eleventh, with the Centropa archive; and the twelfth, with the non-Jews' testimonies collected for a project organized by the United States Holocaust Museum of Memory. The author explains the main contributions of each one of these archives, showing their complementarity. She also analyzes the adopted methodology in each case, providing researchers with very useful information.

The main contribution of Molho's book is her tireless effort to systematically explore the "dialogue" between history and memory; that is, between the facts and their contemporary representation in the context of an official Greek politics of memory, as well as in the terrain of public opinion. Having this in mind and combining primary sources, recent literature, and her deep knowledge of Holocaust representations in Greece, she manages to touch upon sensitive issues and deconstruct dominant "national myths," such as: a) the alleged traitorous stance of Rabbi Tzevi Koretz, thus placing the issue of the Jewish leadership's responsibility in new dimensions; b) the supposed "exemplary behavior" of the Greek Christian population, which is depicted as having helped the persecuted Jews unanimously. On the contrary, Rena Molho shows the negative role that the local population and Greek authorities played on the Black Sabbath, the forced labor, the destruction of the Jewish cemetery, and the looting of Jewish properties. According to the author, pre-war antisemitism and the expectation of the exploitation of Jewish properties can help interpret the issues of collaboration and extensive "by-standing," the oblivion that followed the events, the non-punishment of collaborators, and the problematic aspects of contemporary official Holocaust memory in Greece. She believes that the persistence of such perceptions "discourages substantial dialogue and self-criticism, and it reduces the citizens' historical empathy, because it de-implicates the Nazi victimizers and their collaborators in occupied Greece, while the main responsibility for the destruction is attributed to the Jews themselves, i.e. the victims" (p. 88). Molho also challenges the myth of the "exemplary" stance of the Greek authorities towards the issue of Jewish properties. Instead, she shows their ambivalence: laws were established that favored the reclamation of Jewish properties by the survivors and the new-found Jewish institution for the reconstruction of the Jewish communities, yet they were implemented only partially and with much delay. In the index, Molho provides us with: 1) a memorandum submitted by the new owners of former Jewish businesses (e.g. retail stores), revealing their unwillingness to deliver the properties back, and 2) all the laws concerning the issue of Jewish properties during the war and after the liberation.

For Molho, the consequences of the official politics of memory in Greece tell us much about the failure of the Greek educational system to provide its students with an appropriate Holocaust education, one which can generate empathy and creativeness. In one of her chapters, Molho analyzes the discourse of student project awards during a competition in 2006, and she shows the reproduction of myths, stereotypes, and idealizations. She also shows that, contrary to the Holocaust-education-experts' guidelines, the issue of antisemitism and collaboration is silenced in Greek schools, and the students are not encouraged to comprehend the exceptionality of the Holocaust as a historical event, while experiential learning is completely absent. Finally, she suggests ways for more productive Holocaust teaching, dissociated from the political uses of history¹.

1 I wish to update this discussion a little, by saying that a slow change in terms of the mentalities of Greek teachers is

Elaborating further on the problem of memory, Molho selects and analyzes the discourses of four non-Jewish interviewees, reading between the lines and demonstrating the often unconscious depiction of the Jews as Others, and the reproduction of prevailing and misleading perceptions (e.g. the Jewish “passivity,” the leaders’ “responsibility,” the Christians’ almost “unanimous” solidarity, as mentioned earlier). This was the case even in testimonies that were sensitive to the Jewish suffering.

The author wishes to adopt a very critical stance in her book. In reviewing the relevant historiographical research and/or published books, she examines in detail the adopted methodology, and she exposes the extent to which researchers have managed to handle crucial and controversial issues, such as collaboration, Jewish properties, the attitudes of the non-Jewish Greek population to Jewish suffering, antisemitism, punishment, and the role of Jewish leadership (e.g. Koretz). In other words, she examines the extent to which research in Greece has managed to adopt a critical view vis-à-vis the Holocaust in relation to prevailing perceptions and myths.

All the above information is given in a very clear and systematic manner, which makes the book easily accessible to every reader. The author’s main purpose is to illuminate the uses and the abuses of history in order to contribute to the cultivation of a more constructive Holocaust memory. Sometimes her writing style is overly passionate and it may provoke objections (due to the extensive use of the term “collaborator,” for example). However, the book manages to break with long-standing taboo issues in Greece. For these reasons, I believe an English translation of the book would be more than necessary.

As a final note, what is also needed today is a systematic comparative research on the fate of other (minor) Greek Jewish communities, in order for us to fully understand the complexities related to strong local differentiations during the implementation of the “Final Solution” in Greece. The issues of “collaboration” and “by-standing” also deserve further examination in order to acquire a place in the wider context of war-time and postwar history in/of Greece.

noticeable today. Being in touch with teachers ourselves, I have observed increasing occasional instances of a desire to integrate the Holocaust in more productive ways in teaching—as well as participation in relevant projects.