

FMS, Version en ligne, Intervention

Rachel E. Perry, *Who Will Draw Our History: Holocaust Graphic Narratives by Jewish Women Survivors*

In 1947, Filip Friedman, the head of the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland, observed that Holocaust survivors were driven by “an irresistible inner urge [to] grab a pen to write” and that these accounts were not “isolated cases of a form of graphomania,” but rather “a mighty social phenomenon.”<sup>1</sup> Artists were a part of this collective impulse, but their “graphomania” required additional tools – pencils, paints, and styli. And they were not only compelled to write their stories but to draw and paint and print them, and later annotate them with captions and textual commentary. They assembled unique handmade albums, wordless novels, annotated scrapbooks, pictorial diaries, illustrated books, portfolios, leaflets, and even single sheets of comic strips, in order to show and tell the history of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust from the perspective of the victims.

Despite their volume, to date these works have not received the same kind of critical attention that has been given in spades to word-based testimonies. Neglected by Art History (which privileges unique paintings), they are also sidelined by Holocaust Studies (which privileges textual, oral and video testimonies). Although testimony is at the centre of academic engagement with the Holocaust, extralinguistic sources that go “beyond words” are rarely considered trustworthy, as Leora Auslander has argued.<sup>2</sup> When visual testimonies *are* attended to, they are often used as documentation or mere illustration, divorced from the social conditions of their production, circulation, and consumption: the ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ they were made.

Today, the Holocaust graphic narrative is primarily seen as a medium of belated, intergenerational postmemory. But graphic narratives were not only made by second generation vicarious witnesses. After the Holocaust, artists turned to sequential image-texts – what I call proto graphic narratives. Lacking photographs of their Holocaust experiences, they assembled albums out of their handmade paintings, drawings and prints to recount stories untold, reconstruct a time stolen, remember communities and identities erased, and reclaim their own narratives of persecution. My project considers how *Jewish women* harnessed the form to narrativize their personal and collective experiences under Nazi persecution: as an idiom of witness to a history that had not been able to be documented in real time.

*Who Will Draw Our History?* focuses on eight graphic narratives created in the immediate postwar period by a group of Jewish women artist “first responders.” In Budapest, two albums were created: Ágnes Lukács’s *The Auschwitz Women’s Camp* in 1946 and Edith Bán Kiss’s *Deportation*, painted in the two months after she returned from Ravensbrück, between July and September 1945. (Two other Hungarian albums will figure tangentially: Mariá Turán Hacker’s *Metamorphosis*, begun in Dachau and completed in Budapest between 1944-5 and Zsuzsa Merényi’s picture diary begun in Bergen Belsen and completed in Budapest, between 1944-1945.) Four albums were created by Polish women: Elżbieta Nadel’s *Black Album* made in Prague in 1946<sup>3</sup>; Regina Lichter-Liron’s *Album 1939-1945* completed in Florence in 1946<sup>4</sup>; Zofia Rosenstrauch’s *Auschwitz Women’s Camp* created in Warsaw in June 1945; and Luba Gurdus’s *They Did Not Live to See* created in Poland and Israel and published in New York in 1949. The manuscript concludes with two albums created in Palestine by German-born artists: Ella Liebermann Shiber’s series of 93 drawings begun in the Karolos Detention Camp in Cyprus

in 1946-7 and later published as *Out of the Abyss* and Lea Grundig's *In the Valley of Slaughter* published in Tel Aviv in 1944 and later republished as *Im Mal des Todes* in Dresden, 1947.

Despite their differences, these artists adopted the graphic narrative as a form of testimonial storytelling-picturemaking. Their gender and Jewish identity shaped the way they experienced the Holocaust, but also how they remembered it and then chose to depict and narrate it. Four were deported to Auschwitz (Lukács, Lichter, Rosenstrauch, Libermann Shiber), two to Ravensbrück (Bán Kiss, Libermann-Shiber), and two to Majdanek (Gurdus, Rosenstrauch). Nadel was in the Lviv ghetto, but after her brother was murdered in the summer of 1942, she moved to the Aryan side of Warsaw, where she lived under forged documents thanks to a Righteous Among the Nations. Bán Kiss, who was put to work in a Daimler-Benz factory making aircraft for the Luftwaffe, escaped from a death march with her friend Ágnes Bartha and was raped by Soviet soldiers on her way back to Budapest.

Rarely reproduced, cited or publicly exhibited, these small albums have been largely written out of the historical record, overlooked in institutional archives or inaccessible in private or family collections. There is still no scholarship or centralized website that would make them accessible to a wider audience. In museums and archives, these hyphenated things (art-books, pictorial-albums, image-stories, visual-testimonies) are hard to classify. They raise problems of taxonomy because they don't fit neatly into preexisting search keywords nor obey disciplinary boundaries. In so doing, they prompt questions about how the archive was assembled in the past and how archival practices today assign and maintain hierarchies of value that determine which things count as evidence or testimony. Originals are favored over "photographic reproductions." Separate works of art are privileged over "books" which are more difficult to exhibit and reproduce.

Following Tal Bruttman and Claire Zalc's call for "Microhistories of the Holocaust," my project situates each of these works within the artist's biography, their wartime experience *and* the postwar context of their production and reception. I offer a close reading of each graphic narrative, focusing on questions of style, narrative, temporality, voice, materiality, and function. What is the relationship between personal and collective memory, gender and Jewish identity? How do their early artistic forms of witness relate to the written and oral testimonies the artists later gave? In terms of iconography, what tropes, emblems, motifs and symbols predominate? How do they relate to both the official memory politics of the artists' countries of geographical origin as well as the often transient, multicultural sites of their postwar creation (some in DP camps)? How did these artists envision and address their target audiences: as a community of Jewish survivors or a wider, non-Jewish audience that did not experience the Holocaust? Were they unique objects or were they reproduced and, if so, how many copies were made, where did they circulate and how were they used? Rosenstrauch's album, for instance, was prominently displayed in the first Jewish exhibition in Majdanek in 1946, which she curated; a decade and a half later, it was later introduced during the Eichmann Trial in session no. 71 where it was presented as pictorial proof to accompany witness testimony. Bán Kiss's *Deportation* was first exhibited in a solo show at the Bibliotheca-Officina in Budapest in September 1945 and then in the first postwar Holocaust exhibition in Budapest in 1946: *Akik meghaltak és akik harcoltak népünk becsületéért* (Those who died and those who fought for the honor of our people) organized by Hechalutz and the Jewish Agency for Palestine. Notably, she re-exhibited it in Paris a decade later, in Olga Wormser-Migot and Henri Michel's 1954-55 exhibition, *Résistance, Libération, Déportation*. Lastly, who were the agents behind the scenes: the individuals and institutions that commissioned, published and promoted these early initiatives? Lukács'

*Auschwitz Women's Camp* was published by the Socialist-Zionist Ichud Party to commemorate the first anniversary of the liberation of the Budapest ghetto, and Gurdus' series was exhibited in Palestine and then toured the United States under the auspices of the American Jewish Congress.

In her book *Collect and Record! Jewish Historical Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, Laura Jockusch lists all the salvaged materials collected by the Historical Commissions in their "bottom up," grassroots approach.<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly missing from her account are the many artistic testimonies created by survivors. Among these, the works of Jewish women have been particularly neglected. These early postwar artistic initiatives *about* women, *by* women allow us to "difference" the canon of Holocaust art, and they call on us to expand the very definition of what constitutes testimony. That these eight women undertook their projects so soon after the Holocaust is nothing short of remarkable, given their under-representation in a male-dominated art world and male-dominated postwar Jewish organizations, such as the Historical Commissions, with their entrenched gender roles. They faced considerable obstacles: material and practical challenges and physical and financial hurdles. They needed access to supplies (paper, ink, watercolor or tempera paints, brushes and pencils) and the money to purchase them, a quiet place to work, and, above all, the commodity of time to devote to executing these projects, given their need to work and support themselves and their families. Add to this the crushing sense of grief they labored under, starting from scratch in foreign cities, often the only survivors of their families, uprooted from their homes and homeland, mourning their losses and traumatized by sexual violence.

For all the strides that the field of postwar Holocaust Studies has made, sadly, the "myth of silence" has not yet been debunked regarding the visual arts. This manuscript challenges the disciplinary bias against the "after" as somehow being less authentic or historically valuable than

works made in extremis during the Holocaust. Historians have insisted that during this early postwar period, the survivors were so busy focusing on the “pressing problems of food, health, shelter, clothing, the search for family and a safe future”<sup>6</sup> that artistic projects were, at best, frivolous distractions from nation building or rehabilitation. These works poke holes in the prevailing view that Holocaust survivors only came forward belatedly, during what Annette Wieviorka calls the “era of the witness,” to “show and tell” their stories.<sup>7</sup> By highlighting the largely hidden history of the She’erit Hapleitah’s *artistic* activities in the early postwar period, they offer a crucial corrective to the pervasive “myth of silence.” Informed by recent studies on women in the Holocaust (by Rochelle G. Saidel, Myrna Goldenberg, Andrea Petó, Zöe Waxman, Sara Horowitz, Rachel Pascale Bos, Judith Buber Agassi, Sarah Helm, Natalya Aleksun and Atina Grossmann), my project exposes another historiographic “silence”—regarding postwar art created by Jewish women.<sup>8</sup> I argue that what is fundamentally at stake in them is not only a poetics of recollection but a politics of representation—of seeing *with* Jewish women as a critical act by dominated persons against the dominant narratives of WWII and the primary media of its dissemination, photography and film.<sup>9</sup> My study of these overlooked graphic narratives by women explores how the Holocaust and the She’erit Hapleitah’s “return to life” was experienced and represented—in gendered ways.

Illustrations (selections):



Edith BÀN Kiss, *Deportation*, Budapest, 1945. 30 gouaches



Regina Lichter-Liron, *1939-1945*, Florence, 1946. 9 etchings



Ágnes Lukács, *The Auschwitz Women's Camp*, Budapest, 1946. 24 lithographs



Elżbieta Nadel, *Black Album*, Prague, 1946. 17 ink drawings



Zofia Rosenstrauch, *Auschwitz Women's Camp*, Warsaw, 1945. 28 watercolor and ink drawings



Luba Gurdus, *They Did Not Live to See* (New York: Hatekufah Publishing House, 1949). 16 lithographs



Ella Liebermann Shiber, 93 drawings *Out of the Abyss*, 1946-1950.



Leah Grundig, *BeGey HaHarigah [In the Valley of Slaughter]* (Tel Aviv: Haaretz Press 1944).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Cit. in Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *American Historical Review* (October 2005): 1015-1045.

<sup>3</sup> “Chance Encounters in the Holocaust Archive: Finding Elżbieta Nadel’s “From the Black Album 1939-1945,” EHRI (European Holocaust Research Infrastructure) Document Blog, June 2023: [https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2023/07/04/elzbieta-nadels-black-album/#Remembering\\_to\\_Draw\\_Images\\_from\\_Home](https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2023/07/04/elzbieta-nadels-black-album/#Remembering_to_Draw_Images_from_Home)

<sup>4</sup> “Etched into Memory: Regina Lichter-Liron’s Album 1939-1945,” *MIEJSCE* (Warsaw), No. 9, 2023 (Fall 2023): <http://miejsce.asp.waw.pl/en/etched-into-memory-regina-lichter-lirons-holocaust-album-1939-1945/>

<sup>5</sup> Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Zeev W. Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> On historiography debates regarding the “myth of silence” after the Holocaust, see François Azouvi, *Le Mythe du Grand Silence: Auschwitz, les Français, la Mémoire* (Paris: Fayard, 2012); David Cesarani and Eric J. Sundquist, eds., *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence* (London: Routledge, 2012); Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Philip Nord, *After the Deportation: Memory Battles in Postwar France* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Simon Perego, “Memory before memory? Looking back on the historiography of Holocaust memory in postwar France,” *20 & 21. Revue d’histoire*, vol. 145, Issue 1 (2020): 77-90.

<sup>9</sup> On this topic, see my recent article “A ‘Minor Art’: Early Holocaust Graphic Narratives,” *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* (December 2023): <https://doi.org/10.1163/18718000-12340175>