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REVIEW

# The Holocaust: Telling and Retelling

**Surviving the Camps: Unity in Adversity during the Holocaust**, by Paul R. Bartrop, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 2000, 232 pp., $86.50 (cloth)

**Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Total Domination: The Holocaust, Plurality, and Resistance**, by Michal Aharony, London, Routledge, 2015, 225 pp., £95.00 (cloth)

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Having spent part of the last twelve years studying 195 memoirs penned by 178 Holocaust survivors, interviewing scores of such men and women in many countries and studying related material in 48 Holocaust Museums worldwide, I approached the reviewing of these books with high expectations. I want to say right off the bat that they met my highest hopes, and then some. My only regret is that I came upon them after I had completed writing a related manuscript entitled *Stealth Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust* (forthcoming).

The two authors have credentials quite equal to the challenge: Paul R. Bartrop is a Professor at Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, where he offers courses in genocide studies and Jewish history and religion. Previous books of his include *False Havens: The British Empire and the Holocaust* (1995) and *Australia and the Holocaust, 1933–1945* (1994). While living in Melbourne, he served as President of the Australian Association of Jewish Studies. Dr. Michal Aharony, a third-generation descendant of a family that survived the Holocaust, earned her Ph.D. in Political Science from the New School of Social Research, New York City, and is currently teaching in the History Department of Beit-Berl College, Israel. She specializes in the history of modern political thought and Holocaust studies.

Both authors, I am confident, agree with those historians who believe the past is most honestly clarified by complicating it, albeit the end product generally contradicts "what everyone knows." This is especially true of the history of the Holocaust (1933–1945), and the two books reviewed here are fine examples of what can be learned from effective efforts to unsparingly historicize an event.

While library bookshelves devoted to Holocaust scholarship and survivor memoirs grow more crowded all the time, these two slim volumes stand out among the mass. Taken together, they offer a convincing refutation of two of the most misleading and costly falsehoods about the experience of Nazi camp prisoners. First, the notion that the lives of prisoners were not a source of either resistance or of improving the chances of survival. Second,

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that the Nazi overlords were successful in depriving prisoners (especially if Jewish) of their humanity before murdering them.

Both books reject this disparaging view of prisoner life and inflated view of Nazi success—the views that were promoted by two of the early shapers of thinking about the Holocaust—Bruno Bettelheim, in the case of the Bartrop book, and Hannah Arendt in the case of the Aharony book. By the time Bartrop and Aharony have finished their critique a reader has good reason to question very influential ideas of once highly regarded formative figures in the study of the Holocaust. Rarely in the annals of modern scholarship have so few so maligned so many at so great a cost to Truth and Honor.

Bettelheim's psychoanalytic viewpoint led to seeing Jewish prisoners as both "a mass of people waiting for the SS to tell them what to do… [and] the inhabitants of an entirely Hobbesian world" (Bartrop, 99). Prisoners were regarded as self-centered and selfish isolates, each concerned first and last only with his/her own person. The longer a prisoner survived, the greater the loss of aggression, personality, and wider group identity. Indeed, Bettelheim thought many old-timers eventually adopted Nazi values and ideals as their own.

Drawing primarily on survivor memoirs that appeared up to 1980, all of which were available to Bettelheim but were ignored by him, Bartrop judges Bettelheim's model as "flawed in history as well as in theory" (79). In contrast to Bettelheim, Bartrop represents prisoners as moral and social animals enmeshed in a social system in which "collective resistance and group solidarity ultimately came to the fore" (98). He is convinced "most prisoners identified with, or became part of a group, the better to be able to maximize their survival chances" (x). Prisoners were quick to realize that self-reliance and mutual assistance were indispensable if one was to survive as part of a greater camp society. Survival required participation in "helping, encouragement, and cooperation" (161). Group membership gave prisoners a chance to ease their situation, and was "simply through being, a vigorous form of opposition, to be encouraged as an ideal as much as out of necessity" (116). Indeed, membership in social networks, especially in a small group, "contributed more than any other single factor to the preservation of basic human values—and of life" (161). Alone, a prisoner had little chance of making it through to liberation, while "together, prisoners were able to reinforce their shared sense of humanity through an ongoing appeal to common values and necessities" (154).

Bettelheim's model, with its constricted-focus on the individual actor, is so thoroughly devastated by Bartrop's focus on group attributes that a reader wonders why from 1943 through to his death in 1990, Bettelheim held on so firmly to such a mistaken and misleading representation.

A similar question is posed by Aharony, who scrutinizes Hannah Arendt's model of concentration camp totalitarianism. Like Bartrop, she draws extensively on testimonies of Holocaust survivors, along with interviews, concluding that "all of the interviewees for [my] book, as well as the majority of survivors whose texts [memoirs or interview transcripts] I analyzed, testified to engaging in some form of helping relationship in the camp without which they could not have survived" (140).

Arendt saw it otherwise, as her political philosophy had her convinced that totalitarian systems, such as the Nazi concentration camp, could achieve almost to perfection the total domination of individuals in their sway. Her model, focused as it was on the perpetrators' logic and drive, maintained (as did Bettelheim's model) that it was possible to eradicate to a

great extent dignity, empathy, individuality, morality, and spontaneity; that is, to transform the individual "into a completely conditioned being."[1]

Inclined to downplay the human experience of survivors as reported by them, Arendt concluded that the Nazis had by and large succeeded in obliterating the ability of prisoners to take actions of their own, and thereby had fundamentally altered human nature. Aharony faults this model of totalitarianism for "ambiguities, limits, weaknesses, and inconsistencies... and even contradictory views" (13, 195).

Aharony's model, in contrast, focuses on the prisoner's logic and drive. It maintains (as did Bartrop fifteen years earlier), that prisoners actually "retained a measure of humanity… even in extremity, plurality—and human life, in all of its complexity—existed. ... there is a dimension in human existence that is very difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate." Many prisoners, to their ever-lasting credit, "acted in significantly varied ways to secure their own self-preservation" (221).

Like Bartrop (whom she does not cite), Aharony makes much of the meaning of group membership: the very fact of shared caring "gave meaning to one's life. In the face of the daily absurdity of the camps, given the very limited possibilities prisoners had to help each other, every gesture of goodwill, any form of material or emotional aid, even the most minimal, possessed the greatest value" (156).

Aharony traces Arendt's lack of respect for prisoners' testimonies to an intellectual ethos that avoided compassion, criticized pity, and privileged the spectator (Arendt) over the participant (prisoner). She champions instead "deep" listening to a wide range of complementary voices. Of the survivors in particular she writes that as long as they "were alive, creativity appeared; spontaneity existed, even in the concentration camps" (5).

Gracious in writing style, Aharony is also gracious in saluting Arendt for her "highly significant" contribution to our understanding of modern genocide, "perhaps the most important aspect of Arendt's theory of total domination." That aside, Aharony concludes that "the failure of Nazi totalitarianism to totally dominate its victims demonstrates the persistence of morality and free agency even under the most extreme and dehumanizing conditions… absolute domination is never as absolute as it claims or wishes to be" (225).

We can pause here to consider the range of ways prisoners demonstrated "morality and free agency," as too little is generally known about the matter. Some old-timers, for example, dared to whisper urgent advice to new arrivals about to be questioned by the SS: "Tell them you are 16 and older, or, 40 and younger, and you have a trade," the better to be chosen for slave labor than for the gas chambers. Some who had camp office jobs dared to substitute on the lists of prisoners scheduled to die the next day the tattooed numbers of thieves or informers in place of the numbers of decent folk. When the list was read over the camp loudspeaker system the fate of both types—miscreants and good guys—was sealed.

Some dared to smuggle food and medicine into the camp from "*Kanada*," the camp warehouse where prisoners sorted goods the SS stole from new arrivals who had earlier been sent to the gas chambers. When free of attention from obsequious *kapos* (prisoners serving as cold-hearted supervisors), the smugglers redistributed scarce food and medicine through the camp's informal social system.

All who took such risks (called by me "acts of stealth altruism") knew detection meant severe punishment by the SS. Aharony writes in this connection—"Caring for a fellow inmate, paying attention to the other's needs, sharing food—sometimes with complete

strangers and without expecting to receive anything in return—helped reaffirm one's dignity and humanity" (156).

We might also pause to note that Bartrop and Aharony are in very good company, as many iconic books align closely with their critique of the costly errors of Bettelheim and Arendt. Outstanding in this regard are the works of Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, (1976); Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Extermination Camps* (1991); Nechama Tec, *Resistance: Jews and Christians Who Defied the Nazi Terror* (2013); and Patrick Henry, ed., *Jewish Resistance against the Nazis* (2014).

A final last pause would seem in order, as I would be remiss as a reviewer if I did not offer at least two criticisms: For one thing, both authors, in new editions, could add a now missing discussion of the significance of longstanding Jewish social services (private, not public) in the pre-Hitler years. Both in the secular culture of well-off assimilated urban Jews and in the orthodox culture of poor Shtetl dwelling Jews tradition encouraged provision of altruistic care for the disadvantaged. Many prisoners were probably aware of this moral obligation, and this may have stirred creative adaptations despite fierce Nazi opposition.

My second criticism is directed at the publishers—as they have priced both books at an outrageously high level. I doubt even eager college and university librarians can afford such unreasonable purchase costs, and I sympathize with the authors who know the reading audience they deserve will be sharply curtailed by such sale price excesses.

To end on a high note, as befits the fine quality of the books under review, I would call attention to two brief items not included in either of them. The first is a representation of prisoner life by Manya Frydman Perel, a survivor of six years at eight camps, whose memoir words endorse the Bartrop/Aharony thesis: "We resisted in every way we could. … Our weapons were our bare hands, our minds, our courage, and our faith. … I resisted by stealing bread and potatoes to share with my friends. I resisted by risking my life time and time again. … The Nazis could not crush our spirit, our faith, or our love for life and humanity."[2]

The second is the far-reaching memorable caution of a child survivor, Pierre Sauvage, which goes to the core of the Bartrop/Aharony thesis: "If we remember solely the horror of the Holocaust, we will pass on no perspective from which meaningfully to confront and learn from that horror. … If the hard and fast evidence of the possibility of good on Earth is allowed to slip through our fingers and turn to dust, the future generations will have only dust to build on."[3]

## Notes

1. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 422.
2. Frydman Perel, *Six Years Forever Lost*, 80.
3. Pierre Sauvage, cited in Garber, Berger, and Libowitz, eds., *Teaching of the Holocaust*, 118. See also 107–28.

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