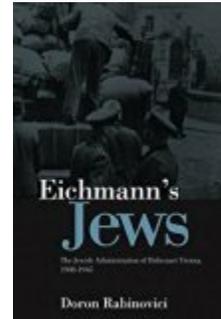


Doron Rabinovici. *Eichmann's Jews: The Jewish Administration of Holocaust Vienna, 1938-1945*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011. x + 260 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-4682-4.

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Collaboration, Resistance, or What? The Story of Jewish Vienna during the Holocaust

When Doron Rabinovici published the German version of this book in 2000, the topic and the way the author dealt with it touched a very sensitive aspect of Jewish and Austrian history: the behavior and the fate of the Jews who were condemned to cooperate (collaborate?) with the Nazis—specifically with Adolf Eichmann who in 1938 started the process leading to the extermination in Vienna; with Baldur von Schirach, who (as “Gauleiter” of Vienna) was extremely proud to present his city as “free of Jews” (which, by the way, was not completely true); and with all the bigger and smaller wheels that the Nazi regime had established to delegitimize and expel all the Jews of Vienna, about 10 percent of the city’s population. More than a decade later, the English version of the book may feel less provocative. The facts of Jewish cooperation with the Nazis has become a lesser taboo.

Rabinovici describes and explains a story that seems to be as simple as it is catastrophic: the story of pogroms, “aryanizations,” and deportations. It is a story that on the surface is the story of “good” and “evil.” And, of course, according to Rabinovici, it is the story of an evil without precedent. But the roles of the good victims and evil perpetrators are more complex.

When Hannah Arendt published her book on Eichmann, she provoked a painful debate within the Jewish communities all over the world. Would the Holocaust have succeeded without the naïve policy of Jewish institutions to cooperate with the murderers in SS or police uniforms? Arendt argued that the Jewish cooperation of

the Jewish Councils and Elders, especially in the ghettos, was necessary for the efficiency of the Holocaust. The Holocaust, noted Arendt, would have (of course) happened without that kind of cooperation. But a policy of strict noncooperation would have prevented the illusions that Jews (understandably) nourished until the very end; would have strengthened the militant resistance; and would have alarmed the Jewish masses at a time when flight would have still be an option for many of the victims.

Rabinovici discusses the Austrian version of the debate started by Arendt half a century ago. The specific Austrian sensitivity concerning Jews cooperating with the Nazi killing machine has one name: Benjamin Murmelstein. Murmelstein was a leading representative of the Jewish self-administration in Vienna and, until the very end of Nazi rule, served as the elder of the Terezin concentration camp. Years after the liberation of the small number of survivors, Murmelstein was treated as a traitor by his own people, a criminal almost comparable to Eichmann. For Rabinovici, this completely negative view of Murmelstein is an oversimplification. Over and over, Rabinovici presents evidence that Murmelstein tried to save Jewish life whenever he saw a chance to do it. To be able to do it, Murmelstein made himself “functional” for the machinery of extermination. He helped the Nazis to select Jews for deportation to the killing fields in the East or directly to the gas chambers. But by selecting some Jews, he tried to save others—for example, the younger generation, to preserve a future for Jewish

identity in Europe.

Murmelstein may have been influenced by the desire to save himself, but if so, his self-interest had clear limits. When he saw an opportunity to escape to London, between Austria's incorporation in the Nazi empire and the beginning of World War II, he decided to stay in Vienna. He saw himself responsible to moderate the impact of the Nazi policy, which—in 1939—could not yet be seen in its mass-murderous intention. Until 1941, when the beginning of the war against the Soviet Union put an end to any concept of deporting all Jews from Europe and the extermination of all Jews became the goal of Nazi policy, Murmelstein tried his best: “In those years until November 1941, Murmelstein helped to enable some 128,000 Jews to leave Austria” (p. 76). But beginning with the fall of 1941, Murmelstein, and others in a similar position in all Jewish communities, had to forget about organizing Jewish emigration. He and the whole Jewish administration in Vienna had to assist with the deportations to ghettos and extermination camps.

Rabinovici, in his extremely well-researched and well-documented book, does not portray Murmelstein as a hero of resistance. He tells the story of Murmel-

stein as an authoritarian person, much feared by the Jews under his command. He underlines the functionality of Murmelstein's (and others') willingness to cooperate. Without this cooperation, the Holocaust would have worked differently. But it would have worked anyway. Active, armed Jewish resistance in Vienna, after 1938, was (as Rabinovici argues convincingly) no realistic option—and neither was it in Terezin.

Schirach's claim that he had made Vienna free of Jews was never completely true. Jews survived in Vienna, in small numbers, in the underground, as “U-boats”; openly, in “privileged” marriages; and within still existing Jewish institutions—like Murmelstein, who survived in Terezin.

Rabinovici does not justify the behavior of Jews who decided to cooperate with the Nazis in a moralistic way. But he tries to understand. “The Jewish functionaries saw no alternative. Cooperation with the Nazis appeared to be the lesser evil. Again and again they cherished the hope of being able to rescue some of the community... They had no power of their own, they were authorities without power. Even retrospectively, there appears to have been no alternative way out of the dilemma” (pp. 202-203).

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