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Kaja Finkler, Golda Finkler. *Lives Lived and Lost: East European History Before, During, and After World War II as Experienced by an Anthropologist and Her Mother.* Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2012. 350 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-936235-90-2.

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Between Life and Loss: A Mother and Daughter Remember the Holocaust and Beyond

The literary canon of Holocaust memory by firsthand witnesses makes room for a new powerful addition: *Lives Lived and Lost: East European History Before, During and After World War II as Experienced by an Anthropologist and Her Mother*, by Kaja Finkler and Golda Finkler. This memoir's power to shake our emotions and its importance within the vast bibliography existing on the subject lie both in the content as well as the form of this text. Its authors are a mother and daughter, two survivors of the concentration camps in Europe and postwar escapees in the United States. Despite the two-name byline on the book cover, Golda and Kaja did not write this book together in a traditional sense. Yet *Lives Lived and Lost* is most profoundly a double memoir, a female *pas de deux* on the unstable stage of European history.

Golda Finkler (née Taub) was born in 1903, in Lublin, Poland, and Kaja, her only daughter, in Warsaw in 1935. In 1940, they were first interned in the Warsaw Ghetto, then in the Piotrków Ghetto, and suddenly they were separated (Kaja witnessed her father's death in the ghetto) and had to face each by herself a series of deportations to several labor and death camps. At war's end, mother and daughter found each other again and emigrated to New York together–their very large family having been almost entirely annihilated. While the mother worked indefatigably to rebuild a future for both, Kaja was able to catch up with her studies, earn a Ph.D., and eventually became a professor of anthropology. Before her death in 1991, Golda undertook the invaluable task of recording on tape, in her native Yiddish, everything she remembered about her life from childhood to the present. Her tapes were the inspiration for Kaja to produce *Lives Lived and Lost.* She transcribed and translated the mother's recordings and, in the process, she also richly glossed the mother's text in order to clarify her statements, provide additional historical data, or simply corroborate her mother's memories through her own recollections. Kaja's asides are printed in boldface, interwoven within Golda's text itself. But this is not all. To the long and enthralling oral narration Golda left us (which spans over two sections of the book, parts 1 and 2), Kaja adds a last section (part 3), written in the first person, from her perspective on the events.

The result is more than simply two memoirs back to back. The mother's part of the memoir includes the description of an era before the daughter was born, and while their experiences overlap at certain points mother and daughter also followed disparate journeys through life. This is a two-voice memoir that splendidly exemplifies how remembering is not simply a one-person act but a collective effort, a patchwork that needs input from other people's memories, as well as the help that historical records and other sources can provide. All these are masterfully blended together to reconstruct a picture of Jewish life in Poland from the turn of the last century to the war, and in particular, the genealogies of two old and illustrious rabbinic dynasties (the Modzitze court and the Lublin court of Golda's paternal and maternal ancestors) whose traces were lost forever in the Shoah.

The way of conceiving Shoah witnessing in literature has greatly changed in the last twenty-five years. In the early memoirs by survivors who wrote about the horrors of the camps immediately after the war, specifics regarding one's private life from before the genocide were regularly left unmentioned because they were considered of lesser relevance. Later waves of Shoah writers began to describe their past as a broader and more complex mosaic, in which many details about prewar and postwar life could finally be included. These help reconstruct not only the picture of *how* the destruction took place but also of *what* specifically was destroyed in this horrific process. *Lives Lived and Lost* is exactly such a text: it does a fundamental job of contextualizing the Shoah experiences

within a much larger personal, national, and historical frame. The victims whose genealogies are traced back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries become 360-degree characters, with fascinating personalities and sometimes unflattering human foibles. Most important, this book reminds us, bravely, of the broader context that surrounds the lives of women in times of war and genocide, as well as in times of peace in an oppressive patriarchal world.

Differences in social class, age, degrees of religiosity and assimilation, sexual and linguistic identities, nationalities, and geographical locations of each victim shaped the experience of men and women in the war. While these distinguishing factors made no difference to the Nazis in terms of their extermination plans (every Jew had to be annihilated), they could significantly affect the way the victims experienced the genocide and whether they succumbed to it or were able to resist and survive (the outsized role chance and luck played in survival notwithstanding). As historian Judith Baumel acutely put it, reformulating the 1960s feminist motto "the personal is political," "the personal was lethal" during the Holocaust.[1] Among the many important issues that this text forces us to contemplate, there is the question, for instance, as to what extent the insular nature and strictures of the Hassidic world impacted the chances for survival of its members–especially women. It is clear that at least in part the ability of Golda to take several life-saving decisions during the very early years of the war, her admirable resourcefulness (she escaped the Warsaw Ghetto and arranged for her daughter to be smuggled out, too), might be ascribed to the fact that she had not been as sheltered from contacts with the non-Jewish world as much as most Hassidic girls: as a young woman, Golda had been allowed by her parents to study law at the University of Warsaw. It had been done secretly, of course, and once Golda married Rabbi Haim Yosef Finkler, in 1932, he forbade her to work and practice law. Nevertheless, the unusual fact that the daughter of a Hassidic *rebbe* was permitted to receive a secular education, and thus access to a larger social environment, may account for her ability to rescue herself and her daughter at first, and for later surviving the camps and life in America on her own, without remarrying. Golda reflects on the harrowing moment when her husband decided not to allow Christian Poles to take and hide with them their only daughter, Kaja, mainly for fear that the girl might be converted or led by circumstances to forget her Jewish heritage. Thorough observance of Jewish laws in the ghettos or in the concentration camps was not only impossible but life-threatening: yet, Golda remembers how at the risk of starving to death her husband kept kosher to his last days, and she herself tried to keep up with religious practices, even in the camps. On the one hand, for Golda and others who reacted similarly, remaining Jewish through religious observance, at a time when Jewish life was being eradicated from the face of Europe, was a form of spiritual resistance. On the other hand, adding to the already dire situation more self-immolating measures further shrank one's chances of survival.

One strength of *Lives Lived and Lost* lies in its beautiful reconstruction of the complex dynamics, the conundrums, the competing pulls toward change and immobility, that emerged within the family life of European Hassidic communities, before they vanished in the Holocaust. In particular, Golda's account of Jewish family life in early twentieth-century Poland is enchanting. Her rich narration about prewar life in the Hassidic courts of rabbis, scholars, their wives and children, bring to mind stories by I. B. Singer, Elias Canetti, and, more poignantly, Glikl of Hamelin (1646 -1724), the first Jewish female autobiographer. Like Glikl, Golda also lingers over the piety and qualities of the dead, her own and most Jews' above-board ethical behavior in the camps, and her struggle in negotiating the strict rules of her culture and the necessary flexibility that the changed historical circumstances required of her. Kaja's chapter, in which she talks about her survival in Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen when she was hardly ten, her loss of religious belief (in contrast to her mother's unwavering religiosity) and disconnection from Jewish practice, the bittersweet fulfillment of the "American dream" through education and academic success, brings to mind similar wrenching reflections on one's life as a victim, exile, and daughter in a patriarchal world by Ruth Klüger (*Still Alive*, 2001), for instance, as well as Mary Antin (*The Promised Land*, 1912), or Eva Hoffman (*Lost in Translation*, 1990). In sum, just as Golda and Kaja belong to a distinguished Jewish genealogy, so does their book belong to an important Jewish literary line.

Lives Lived and Lost is paramount in reminding us that the Holocaust did not just happen and did not simply end. The antisemitism on which it built its rationale was nothing new to European Jews, and the patriarchal culture that oppresses women through religion, social hierarchies, and violence was not invented by Nazism and therefore did not disappear when Hitler did. Jewish patriarchy, patriarchy in toto, and antisemitism were all simultaneously at work in challenging and shaping the way in which women reacted to the imminent danger and the hardships they faced in their postwar lives. Kaja portrays a painful picture of her mother's melancholic life

in America. There was no American-Dream future for Golda, and the past was too painful to revisit: "we both concluded that it was best to be silent [about the past], as I have done until now," Kaja writes (p. 255).

One reaches the end of this book wishing for a few illustrative photographs that would have put a face on the characters so lovingly reconstructed in these stories. Perhaps though this visual void best echoes the unbridgeable gaps left behind by the atrocious history that marked the lives of this Jewish mother and daughter.

Note

[1]. Judith Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998), ix.

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