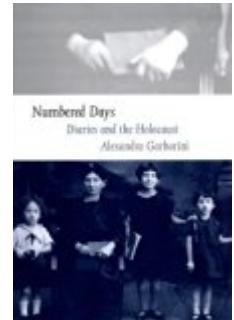


Alexandra Garbarini. *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. xvi + 262 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-11252-8.



Reviewed by Samuel Goodfellow

Published on H-German (March, 2007)

Our understanding of the Holocaust is surprisingly incomplete in providing direct access to what Jews thought and how they reacted at the time. Students of the period can only imagine what it might be like to face, in full awareness, not just one's own death, but collective genocide. In the popular imagination, Jews seemed to march like somnambulists to their fates. The apparent passivity of Jews has been, to some extent, magnified by post facto accounts, which, with notable exceptions such as Primo Levi, dwell on what happened to Jews rather than on what Jews did. The diary of Anne Frank, as edited by her father, partially filled the gap. More recently, Viktor Klemperer's diary presented a more mature and nuanced personal reaction to his own experiences. The views of a few idiosyncratic individuals, however perspicacious, do not, of course, do full justice to the variety of Jewish responses and their attempt to make meaning out of their circumstances.

Alexandra Garbarini's thoughtful book addresses this deficiency by analyzing unpublished Jewish diaries from the war, of which there are

hundreds, with a view towards identifying the themes, trends, and variety of matters expressed by the diarists. The book is not based on memoirs or subsequent oral testimonies, but on diaries, which constitute a reservoir of unreified expressions of Jewish experience. Oral testimonies and memoirs do not bear witness to the subtle changes in emotional perception that occur as events unfold as well as diaries. Oral histories are also shaped by subsequent information, narratives, and the biases of prevailing discourse. The diaries reveal an immense variety of personalities and individual situations. The contribution of this book, however, lies in its exploration of the themes and trends evident across this broad collection of diaries.

Garbarini turns first to examining the question of Jewish identity and religion in the face of the Holocaust. The scope of the catastrophe placed considerable stress on individual Jews' pre-existing belief systems. Garbarini analyzes the diaries of two Jews, Chaim Kaplan from Poland and Lucien Dreyfus from Alsace, to illustrate how "neither was able to retain his prior

conception of God and humanity" (p. 19). Originally devout, Kaplan was led by his experiences in Warsaw to a bitter sense that God had deserted the Jews. At the other end of the spectrum, the secular schoolteacher Dreyfus began to reject his lifelong belief that western civilization was progressive, embracing instead the notion that God, not man, was the only hope for humanity. For both these men, the Holocaust was an affront to the principles that had guided their lives. Like many Jews during the first two years of the war, they were forced to reassess their core beliefs and redefine themselves as Jews. Significantly, both still held out hope. The Nazis forced Jews to examine their connection to Judaism by asserting a comprehensive, albeit flawed, definition of Jewishness and then assigning it an outcome—extermination. Some Jews, such as Viktor Klemperer, insisted that they were not Jewish. Others found the prevailing distinctions within the Jewish community, whether Orthodox, Hasidic, Reform, Zionist, or non-practicing reduced to useless quibbles in the face of a collective disaster. Jews had to remind themselves who they were, and to reassess, reject, or reaffirm their identity.

During the early part of the war, diarists exhaustively pored over news of hope and direction. Even when, against all odds, Jews were able to overhear a radio broadcast or read a paper, they had to read between the lines. News became a social commodity that brought Jews together in discussion, hope, or despair. As the extermination process accelerated, however, news became irrelevant in the face of widespread awareness that even if the Allies won, it might be too late. Garbarini describes a dynamic of awareness, first in the form of "hopeful reading" and then of despair. After 1943, the volume of diaries drops off, partly because many of the writers were dead, but also because many could no longer find a reason to write.

Throughout the book, Garbarini is concerned with the peculiar properties of diaries and how to

interpret them. What do they tell us? Who was the audience? What form of literature are they? How accurate are they? For many of those writing during the Holocaust, diary writing took on a different character from the ordinary recitation of daily events. In many cases the diarists were not writing for themselves, but for others. Separated from their families and unable to correspond directly with relatives, many simply substituted a diary for letters, informing them of what was happening and exhorting their exiled kin to make the most of their opportunities. Still others wrote in the painful knowledge that they would probably not be alive to tell the story, so the diary served as a record for posterity. At times, these diarists would despair that even if their words somehow survived, nobody would believe them. A few wrote as a release, hoping that recording their emotions would help them cope. For many diarists, personal reflections were an expression of hope, either for relatives or, in a more limited way, for themselves.

What distinguishes this book is the way that it moves past the view of Jews as victims or objects and develops their identity as "meaning makers" (p. 163). The fact that about six million Jews died during the Holocaust tends to act as a monolithic wall separating us from those who experienced it. European Jews were not simply acted upon and they were not a faceless multitude; each individual, in his or her own way, struggled to maintain hope, reassess personal identity, and inform future generations.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Samuel Goodfellow. Review of Garbarini, Alexandra. *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13005>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.