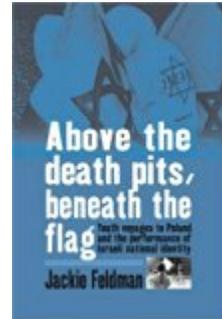


Jackie Feldman. *Above the Death Pits, beneath the Flag: Youth Voyages to Poland and the Performance of Israeli National Identity*. Berghahn Books, 2008. xix + 307 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-362-6.

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Making Citizens

Jackie Feldman—the son and grandson of Holocaust survivors—feels a personal attachment to the story he tells in this book. In his own words, it was *nostalgia* or the desire to return that set him on a train journey in the early 1990s to Ungvar, the birthplace of his father. This intimate personal experience, which he sees as a pilgrimage of *nostalgia*, led him to believe that the large numbers of Israeli teenagers who travel annually to concentration and death camps in Poland, are on a similar pilgrimage—a quest for roots, meaning, and transcendence. This speculation gave birth to this work, which explores the annual Israeli youth trips organized by the Ministry of Education in Israel to Holocaust sites in Poland—Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, and Treblinka.

At the center of Feldman’s conceptual framework is the notion of transformation. He argues that the Israeli youth quest is designed as a *masa*—a group voyage of physical and emotional strenuousness whose goal is to transform the students along values promoted by the state: “Its [the journey’s] ultimate purpose is to root the sanctity of the State in the experience of the Shoah. The voyage is a civil religious pilgrimage, which *transforms* student into *victims*, *victorious survivors*, and, finally, *olim* (immigrants; *ascenders*) to the Land of Israel and *witnesses of the witnesses*” (p. 3). Feldman argues that since the majority of the students are born in Israel and thus take the state for granted as a “natural” right, the journey to Poland is supposed to unsettle this sense of certainty in order to create a new sense of responsibility

for and ultimate loyalty to the state. It is not a coincidence that the trips are offered at the age of sixteen, when youth have a penchant to romanticize death. Neither is it incidental that the journey happens shortly before obligatory military service.

In order to show how this transformation from a student to a loyal citizen unfolds, Feldman takes us on a fascinating journey through context and theory. He presents an ethnographic study of a single school group on a trip to Poland in September 1995 (a problematic choice, for reasons I will discuss later) as well as post-trip interviews and voyage veterans’ presentations over the ensuing decade. Theoretically, Feldman grounds his exploration in Victor Turner’s study of religious pilgrimage and Don Handelman’s distinction between rituals that mirror and rituals that model social order. According to the author, the voyages to Poland *model* social relations in a sense that they not only “perpetuate existing power relations ... but constitute power and *create* community and a shared cosmology” (p. 9).

Feldman starts his exploration by contextualizing the trips within the historical development of Shoah memory in Israel. He presents the evolution of Shoah memory as firmly embedded in the Zionist discourse, which portrays pre-Israeli history (exile, diaspora) as negative and Israeli (state) history as positive. He also shows how subsequent Israeli governments mobilized and shaped Shoah memory for their own political aims and how they used school

curricula and other vehicles of memorialization (memorial days and institutions) to do so. Trips to Poland were a new means of using the Shoah to create “stronger links to the history of Israel and its heritage” among students and to strengthen their determination “to guard the future of the nation and the State” (p. 58). The Ministry of Education, the prime organizer of youth voyages to Poland since 1988, coined the motto: “It is my brothers I am seeking.” This motto points unequivocally to Israeli national identity as the central aspect of the trips. It is “us”—Israelis—who go “there” to find “us.” In such rhetoric, as Feldman stresses, “there” (Poland) does not really matter other than to emphasize the contrast between Poland as the landscape of death (the Jewish past) versus Israel as the landscape of life (the Jewish future).

The most original part of Feldman’s work lies in his analysis of how exactly the participants come to identify Israel as their life-giver and future. As one participant said, “Now I know that I had to travel two thousand kilometers to find the beautiful Land of Israel” (cited on p. 241). Feldman strives to understand this realization as a consequence of an eight-day ritual reenactment of survival, in which students’ bodies and minds undergo a symbolic identification with death, survival, victory, and the redemption of the State of Israel. Feldman masterfully unpacks all the elements of the voyage that contribute to this transformation. He shows how, from the beginning, the voyage to Poland is narrated as a voyage to the Shoah: “‘Being there’ means being in the Shoah” (p. 68). He explains how the staff for the trip—teachers, guides, and survivors/witnesses—are all assigned roles to help the process. A special role is assigned to the flags and the Israeli anthem, *Hatikvah*, which serve to isolate the group from their Polish surroundings and to territorially claim Holocaust sites for Israel.

It is, however, the survivor-witness who plays the central role in transforming the students into witnesses. He enters as a hero, the carrier of meaning, and the incarnation of victimhood, survival, and ultimate redemption. Importantly, he is a physical bridge between the students and the Shoah. His testimony acquires transformative power by being offered *in situ* (a barracks in Birkenau, for example) where it is cold and dark and thus “authentic.” By pointing to things happening “right here,” the survivor further deepens the sense of authenticity producing a powerful experience for his listeners.

The physical aspect is critical. Feldman argues convincingly that bodily experiences—being there, touching, smelling, and feeling pain (breaking down, crying)—are

crucial in inscribing nationalist longing and desire and thus transforming the students: “Where the power of the common narrative weakens, modern nation-states may marshal bodily practices—rites of transformation, ‘models’—to do what bureaucracies cannot; recharge its institutions and social boundaries with passion and commitment. Where the narratives are consensual, bureaucracies and spectacles (‘mirrors’) will suffice in assuring continuity and assigning citizens their place” (p. 264). After crying together, students wrap their bodies with flags and sing *Hatikvah*, thus corporeally identifying Israel with the solution to the catastrophe they have just felt and experienced. The cycle closes. Now, with their knowledge and newly inscribed commitment, the students will “ascend” to Israel on a symbolic *aliyah* to bear witness—to carry the mission of Holocaust survivors.

By introducing this nuanced anthropologically informed analysis of the voyages as a ritual of survival, Feldman renders obsolete the argument that the trips constitute mere political manipulation of Shoah memory by the Israeli government in order to indoctrinate or “brainwash” Israeli youth. He thus situates his study in a dialogue with the work of Tom Segev (1991), Adi Ofir (1995), and Moshe Zuckerman (1996), who look at the voyages through the lens of state hegemony, “industry,” and “kitsch.” Although Feldman acknowledges the power of ideology behind the organization of these trips, he also underscores the power of ritual and sincere emotion on the site. His focus on the development of the excursion as “the experience” in itself shows that the journey takes on its own life, independent of the original planning. The students do not merely internalize and enact the state’s intentions but modify and resist them “through interaction with the site, state symbols, authority figures of the voyage, and each other” (p. 97). Feldman draws our attention to “the performance of the voyage” as a genuine emotional and corporeal encounter of the students with the Holocaust—the event that itself resists imposed representations (p. 10).

This work has many obvious strengths; at the same time, one possible criticism concerns the way in which the research treats the Polish landscape against which these events take place. Feldman claims that the character of the trips has remained unchanged in the fifteen years since his fieldwork. Inadvertently or possibly despite his best intentions, he thus erases today’s Poland from his narrative while highlighting and condemning a similar erasure made by trip organizers to mold students’ impression of Poland as the landscape of death. In both important and subtle ways, the Poland that the author de-

picts no longer exists, either. The noisy *Jelcz* buses that carried Feldman and Israeli students around Poland in 1995 are no longer in use. Economically, culturally, and socially, Poland is not the same country it was in 1995. Even the sites of memorialization, including former concentration and death camps, have changed. Ignoring the transformations of the sites and their impact on Israeli youths' perceptions of Poland today not only reproduces the organizers' attempt to obscure the country they visit but also creates a false notion of the inalterability of the trips.

Notwithstanding this minor criticism, this at mo-

ments brilliant book is always intelligent and in-depth. It is written with scholarly integrity and erudition. The importance of Feldman's contribution to the scholarship of contemporary Israeli identity and the representations and the memory of the Holocaust is undeniable. It is a welcome, fresh, and nuanced intervention that unsettles our assumptions about Israeli trips to the sites of the Holocaust as mere ideological indoctrination and political manipulation. It opens up fresh questions about the relationship between nation-state bureaucracies, textual and bodily experiences, and the pursuit of nationalism. And it asks where the limits and risks are of this conscious cultivation of nationalism in today's Israel.

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