

# H-Net Reviews

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Laura Quercioli Mincer. *Patrie dei superstiti: Letteratura ebraica del dopoguerra in Italia e in Polonia*. Rome: Lithos, 2010. 318 pp. EUR 18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-88-89604-64-9.

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## Jewish Authors in Postwar Italy and Poland: Memories Old and New

Although Jewish writers have authored countless works in all the languages of the Diaspora, it would be impossible to offer a complete outline of the history of the European Jewry in the postwar period within the space of a single volume. Laura Quercioli Mincer's book entitled *Patrie dei superstiti* (The survivors' homelands) focuses on the literary production of two countries in the aftermath of World War II, namely, Italy and Poland, in her meticulous efforts to delineate and analyze a specific fragment of an artistic and historical phenomenon that is admittedly much broader. Four key themes are explored within the pages of this text, each one in the span of a single chapter that could easily stand alone as a thoughtfully crafted essay. The themes in question are: the gradual reinsertion of the Jews in European society after the Holocaust; their political involvement in the affairs of the state (which often took the form of Communism or Zionism); the self-hatred experienced by many Jews—including homosexuals who struggled to come to terms with a conflicted sense of their own identity; and the "return" of a second generation, or rather, the complex process through which the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors were able to articulate the memory of the generation that preceded them. Quercioli Mincer chose to follow a comparativist thematic approach in an attempt to define a "united Jewish culture" ("cultura ebraica unita" [p. 9]) as opposed to allowing the geographical, linguistic, and historical differences that separate the works she analyzed to compartmentalize her scholastic inquiry. As such, this volume rightfully begins by owning up to its potential limitations by openly stat-

ing that many excellent writers have not found a place within its pages, or have simply been referenced in passing. The theme that truly unifies the four chapters that make up this work is, in fact, a "crucial medium of communication between reality and literary texts" (p. 10).

The first chapter ("Non avremo più paura della gente?" 'Il ritorno dopo la Shoah' ["Will we not be afraid of people anymore?" 'The return after the Holocaust']) consists of a twofold effort to chronicle the return of both Italian and Polish Jews to the reality of everyday life after the war. The author begins by focusing her attention on a number of literary reflections of the experience of Polish Jews (by Adolf Rudnicki, Henryk Grynberg, Michal Glowinski, Bogdan Wojdowski, and Wilhelm Dichter). She then shifts her attention to Italian authors, starting with the critically acclaimed works of Giorgio Bassani before transitioning to a discussion of lesser-known authors, such as Giacomina Limentani and Aldo Zergani. Although it would have been impossible to avoid referencing Primo Levi's substantial contributions to the Italian literary canon in this volume, Quercioli Mincer rightfully alludes to the fact that an overwhelming number of critical studies on the writings of Italian Jews already focus on Levi's works, to the point that his voice has been overemphasized by critics at the expense of other important artists. For this reason, his considerable body of work is touched on only sparingly in this book as a source of comparison.

The second chapter ("Fra Mosca e Gerusalemme: 'Ubi

Lenin, ibi Jerusalem' ” [”Between Moscow and Jerusalem: 'Where there is Lenin, there is Jerusalem' ”]) is informed by an understanding of the relationship between the Jewish people and Communist ideology. With respect to the Italian Jews, the Zionist experience is also brought to bear in this portion of the text, as well as its impact on Jewish efforts at self-representation. The burden of old prejudices, new forms of persecution, and the difficult search for a new homeland weigh heavily on the works of literature that are addressed in these pages. This chapter offers a careful reading of numerous historical, political, and critical texts that serve to contextualize (among others) the writings of Isaak Babel, Hanna Krall, Kazimierz Brandys, Jozef Hen, and Janina Bauman in Poland, as well as those of Clara Sereni, Vittorio Segre, and Giorgio Voghera in Italy.

The third chapter (“Amori Proibiti e odio di sé” [“Forbidden loves and self hatred”]) stands out for its quasi-exclusive focus on the life and career of single Polish author Julian Strykowski, who is presented as emblematic of a deeper psychological and social malaise. His tendency to explore the fragmented nature of his own sense of self, which consists of a complex *mélange* of Jewish culture and homosexual identity, contributes to a feeling of self-hatred that is arguably relevant to the works of many artists whose writings speak to a condition of marginality. Inasmuch as Bassani had also explored the conflict between Jewish identity and homosexuality in *Gli occhiali d'oro* (1958), Quercioli Mincer has occasion to engage her readers in an existential discourse, one in which anti-Semitism and homophobia have a profound (and, at times, similar) impact on the characters that inhabit specific works by Strykowski and Bassani.

The fourth (“Ricordare, dimenticare: Il ritorno della seconda generazione” [“Remembering, forgetting: The return of the second generation”]) and final chapter in *Patrie dei superstiti* is entirely devoted to the Shoah. Unlike the majority of critical writings devoted to this subject, the chapter in question aims to dissect and analyze the imperfect yet necessary process of passing on the memory of the Holocaust to future generations. As the number of living witnesses and survivors inevitably decreases with the passing of time, the reconstruction and retelling of this dark period in our recent history at the hands of a new generation will soon become the only option available. In light of Marianne Hirsch's definition of “postmemory” (p. 185), this chapter presents readers with a comparative description of five autobiographical texts (two in Polish and three in Italian) written by authors who were born a number of years after

World War II (Anna Bikont, Agata Tuszynska, Helena Janeczek, Alessandro Schwed, and Massimo Boni). These works belong to a second generation of Holocaust literature. They are still defined by a complex system of compromises between historical documentation and literary production even if they bear witness to the Shoah indirectly. Perhaps these considerations on a second generation of authors who endeavor to document the injustices (and the long-term effects) of anti-Semitism in twentieth-century Italy and Poland constitute the most innovative aspect of Quercioli Mincer's research. Taken as a whole, in fact, this volume makes a considerable contribution to the field of comparative literature, Judaic studies, and Holocaust studies.

What is lacking, however, in *Patrie dei superstiti* is an acknowledgement of the works of critically acclaimed Italoophone authors, like Edith Bruck and Giorgio Pressburger, both of whom were born in Hungary and relocated to Italy after the war. Inasmuch as these authors have adopted the Italian language as their principal artistic vehicle their exclusion in this case would appear to be shortsighted. While it is true that their unique backgrounds contribute to a decidedly complex literary panorama in postwar Italy, a failure to consider the implications that arise when the language of artistic production takes precedence over an author's place of birth runs the risk of glossing over the intricate nature of an increasingly multicultural, multilingual modern society—one that owes a significant debt to the literary contributions of the Jewish people. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret the particular focus of Quercioli Mincer's text as a flaw. The author rightfully chose to whittle down a potentially boundless line of scholastic inquiry by limiting its scope in geographical, chronological, and linguistic terms. Rather than overemphasizing the authors, works, and national literary productions that she opted not to explore, it makes more sense to look at her most recent publication as a fundamentally important step in a journey that will inevitably require the collaboration of a worldwide community of academic voices. The translanguaging production of such authors as Bruck and Pressburger are bound to be the subject of future scholarly publications, and the same could be said for the literary contributions of Jewish authors from any and all countries that were affected by the Shoah, both within and outside the ever-expanding European borders.[1]

In many respects, Quercioli Mincer's latest book speaks to the erudition of its author while placing high demands on its readers. It is certainly less than common for a scholar to possess specialized knowledge of

how the postwar Jewish experience is reflected in both Italian and Polish literature, to say nothing of the multilingual nature of the sources cited in this work. An ideal reader of this text, one who would be able to consult each and every one of its sources, would have to possess a knowledge of Italian, French, English, Polish, Hebrew, and Yiddish—to say nothing of the complicated literary history of the European Jews—a factor that speaks to the unique background and expertise of its author. In fact, this important volume is actually an Italian translation of

work that was originally published in Polish (*Ojczyzny ocalonych: Powojenna literatura żydowska w Polsce i we Włoszech* [2009]). One can only hope that eventually it will be made accessible to an Anglophone audience as well.

#### Notes

[1]. For clarification of the term “translingual,” see Maria Cristina Mauceri, “Interview with Edith Bruck,” *ITALICA* 84, nos. 2-3 (Summer/Autumn 2007): 607-613.

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