

**Emanuel Hurwitz, Zürich**

**"A world without reality ... ". Jewish Holocaust survivors in Switzerland**

Review

**Gross, Raphael, Eva Lezzi, and Marc R. Richter (Hg.), "Eine Welt, die ihre Wirklichkeit verloren hatte ...". *Jüdische Überlebende des Holocaust in der Schweiz* ["A world without reality ...". Jewish Holocaust survivors in Switzerland]. Zürich, Limmatverlag, 1999.**

**Gross, Raphael, Eva Lezzi et Marc R. Richter (éds.), "Un monde qui avait perdu sa réalité..." *Survivants Juifs de l'Holocauste en Suisse*. Traduction de Sophie Pavillon. Lausanne, Éditions Antipodes, 2003.**

An important book! A necessary book! And a very moving book!

The intention of the three authors - a lawyer, a female historian, and a male historian - was to contribute to the debate about Switzerland's role in World War II. Without the persistence of the World Jewish Congress, the initiator of the debate, a public discussion about this dark chapter of Switzerland's history presumably would never have occurred. Unfortunately, the discussion soon degenerated to mere haggling over numbers - did Switzerland turn back thirty thousand or one hundred thousand people at its borders, sending them to certain death? – and haggling over money - the restitution payments that Swiss banks should pay to settle their debts with survivors.

The World Jewish Congress, which hastily called for billions of Swiss francs in restitution payments, bears part of the responsibility for this development. This demand was welcomed by all those who preferred to avoid any confrontation with these painful and shameful realities and to continue suppressing the entire issue. The old anti-Jewish cliché of the avaricious Jew who only cares about money was quickly and easily revived and pressed into service, in order to ward off a discussion of the real problems.

The debate raged over numbers and statistics - abstract, detached, as if this were only a matter of economics. The human dimension was lost. The editors of this volume were unwilling to accept this development.

**Statistics fall silent**

With this collection of personal reports by eleven Holocaust survivors who now live in Switzerland, the editors have reintroduced the human, the biographical background into the discussion. Statistics and financial negotiations fall silent in the face of Josef H.'s shocking narrative, the story of a fourteen-year-old who was deported together with his father and brother from occupied Czechoslovakia to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp; in the face of the dreams of the gas chamber and selections in Auschwitz which still plague Eduard Kornfeld today; in the face of the feelings of Judith Meyer-Glück, whose mother decided not to stay with her nine-year-old daughter, but to instead accompany her aged and infirm mother-in-law to a concentration camp, where both were murdered; in the face of all the misery, violence and bestiality these people were forced to endure. The reports speak directly to one's emotions, to one's heart; they can leave no one cold. These are not abstract reports about the Holocaust, the Shoah, the camps, and discrimination. Here, people retell, simply but all the more intensely, their own experiences. And what they relate makes everything come alive

again, directly and authentically, so that at times the reader finds it hard to bear. I found myself only able to read this book in small portions. And many of the survivors whose contributions are included in this volume have recounted the story of their experiences and their suffering so precisely and comprehensively for the first time.

### **Precise and true to detail**

This book is also important in a more fundamental sense. It demonstrates, in an era in which only that which is measurable and ponderable is accepted and efficiency and rapid success are the universal yardstick, that there are other, more important values: life histories do not lend themselves to being measured or weighed. Whoever attempts to computerize them must dissect them into parts, extract "items" and use them to make comparisons. From these, one can compile statistics showing what percent of the population has this or that characteristic and what percent doesn't. What results is lifeless, a skeleton, dead material. It reveals nothing about reality. This world is threatened – in another sense – with the loss of reality. What people have experienced and endured must be told. As precisely and true to detail as possible.

Fulfilling this demand is the achievement of oral history and thus of this book. One can question whether the reports in this volume are exact accounts of what really occurred. Autobiographical accounts are always subjective, always biased. But they capture life with all its facets and all its horrors. No mathematical formula can replace that.

### **An atmosphere of trust**

One needs time to conduct such interviews. And the interviewers took that time. They ask their respondents questions with extreme care and great sensitivity. This is only possible in an atmosphere of trust, an atmosphere without tension, which is comparable to a psychotherapeutic conversation, when both clients and therapists take time, a great deal of time. Those who want to get to the bottom of the problems in their lives can not be satisfied with quick and efficient repair services. Mental health cannot be achieved with quality control. Nor can quality control guarantee the quality of such reports.

It is too early to tell whether the editors will succeed in shifting the debate in Switzerland to another level and in counteracting today's hectic zeitgeist. One can only hope, for all these reasons, that this book will be widely read.

Translation from German: **Paula Bradish**

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**Short biographical note**

**Emanuel Hurwitz** (\*1935) is a psychiatrist, psychotherapist and psychoanalyst in Zuerich. He has published numerous articles in the area of health politics and the problems of anti-Judaism. His books include: *Otto Gross - "Paradies"-Sucher zwischen Freud und Jung*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1979; *Bocksfuss, Schwanz und Hörner: Vergangenes und Gegenwärtiges über Antisemiten und ihre Opfer*, Zürich, Nagel & Kimche, 1986; *Christen und Juden - Tagebuch eines Missverständnisses*, Zürich, Nagel & Kimche, 1991.

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