

## SUMMARY

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### **Trails of the Holocaust – Overlooked Books**

Borwicz and others

The book *Trails of the Holocaust – Overlooked Books. Borwicz and others* poses a question as to the possibility of the Jewish voice appearing in Polish literature, a voice that in seeking to articulate evidence uncovers the reality of Polish-Jewish relations. On one hand, this voice already had a strong literary presence in the 1940s. On the other, it remained unheard, passed over and marginalised. This is evidenced by one of the most frequent remarks made about Jan Tomasz Gross's books: it was noted that all the issues Gross raises were known beforehand, and had appeared in historians' studies, in memoirs and in literature. However, the reasons for this 'absence while being present' have rarely been analysed: had Gross's subject matter been constantly present in the consciousness, it would not have triggered such emotional reactions on being revealed. Paradoxically, this emotionality, perceived as subjective hyperbole, was elevated to an accusation levelled against Gross. This tangled set of issues relates to evidence for its 'absent presence', and their emotional entanglement forms the problem framework of this book.

The starting point is the writer and editor, Michał Borwicz, who sought to pay tribute to the most diverse examples of Jewish resistance, and who wished to commemorate traces of their lives and deaths. His book *The Song Escapes Whole – an Anthology of Verse about Jews under German Occupation (Pieśń ujdzie cało... Antologia wierszy o Żydach pod okupacją niemiecką)* provides a very significant view of the fate of the Jews – living in ghettos and in hiding, of those who managed to survive and those who were starved to death. Naturally, this depicts those beside their death: a portrayal of Polish-Jewish relations. However, not only was this view, both bitter and accusatory towards neighbours, not presented by Borwicz in the introduction to the anthology, it was almost entirely overlooked: it was simply not formulated. On the other hand, the introduction does discuss the situation of Jews under occupation in a general sense and, due to the form of the testimonies presented in the anthology, analyses the problem of artistic output in those times in a detailed way. This is not substitute subject matter, since it is related to the question of its aesthetic evaluation, which led to its disappearance from what is deemed 'good literature', a consequence of the customary conventionality of this work, its strident emotionality and situational character.

Borwicz fervently defends the specificity of this work and formulates substantive arguments revealing the less-researched aspects of creating in borderline situations (the text entitled *Literature in the Camp*), as if he sensed the shadow obscuring verse written by those who were conscious of the inevitability of the end. He defends this poetry's right to a place in the annals of literary history and in memory, despite its prolonged absence. However, Borwicz does not formulate this defence openly, just as he fails to accuse Poles directly of pre-war and later antisemitism: the pamphlet *Organising Rage* focuses on German propaganda, concealing the score-settling with Polish relations with Jews at that time. Writing does not simply become a way for the Jewish voice to exist in Polish culture (this is how Borwicz would exchange correspondence on the National Democratic Party's relations with the minority – *People, books, arguments...*).

At the same time, Borwicz's attitude to Holocaust-era literature allows us to speak of creative work as a form of resistance, and particularly as a form of survival (quite literally, for in occasional cases it really did save its writers, who were treated in the camp in a "different", "less oppressive" way, or who were shielded by their fellow inmates), as well as when it gave its writers a moment of freedom. Literature was a form of survival, a form that lived on although those writing it had perished. This specific, affective and emotional aspect reveals another dimension to speaking of "less-valuable literature": artistic criteria cease to be self-evident.

Emotions bring with them other problems touched upon by other authors analysed in this book. In *Death Brigade*, Leon Weliczker describes the different degrees of emotional torpor that ensnared those in *Sonderkommando*. In *I Survived Oświęcim* Krystyna Żywulska both speaks and does not speak of her experiences in Auschwitz (she speaks as a Pole and keeps silent as a Jew); Marek Edelman's pamphlet *The Ghetto Fights* shows what he and others thought of the dignity of life during the Ghetto Uprising. These are important books, which reveal different aspects to perceiving the Holocaust that are at the same time hardly present in current consciousness (although this observation concerns Żywulska's book the least).

Among these books, it is also worth noting Nachman Blumental's *Innocent Words*, which, by focusing on the language of the perpetrators, analyses the concealment of the Holocaust. This question, which Victor Klemperer also raises in his work, not only reveals the problem of constructing the linguistic "invisibility" of the Holocaust, but also shows the emotional approach to language. Perpetrators created the conditions for expressing opinions, and victims were stripped of their language and forced to use "innocent words", in doing so also shaming and humiliating them. I treat the linguistic aspect of the "invisible visibility" of the Holocaust as a prelude to the processes that appear later, which is the reason why they are located here in reverse order to that in which they are discussed.

*Translated by Rob Pagett*