Book Reviews

Remembrance and Reconciliation, by BJORN KRÖNDORFER *(Yale University Press 1995), 260 pp.*
Things We Couldn't Say, by DIET EMAN WITH JAMES SCHAAP *(Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 390 pp.*

Reviewed by
Ben Eilbott

Two Holocaust books. In one, Kröndorfer struggles with the *memory* of life and death, doubting and analyzing as he attempts to move from remembrance to reconciliation. In the other, Eman has no doubts—for her, life and death are real and constant, leaving little time for doubts and no energy for analysis.

Jewish and German post-Holocaust third generations face each other in Kröndorfer's study. They are "young American Jews and non-Jewish Germans, trying . . . to come to terms with the history, memory, and memorialization of the Holocaust. (They) . . . belong to the third generation . . . since the extermination of European Jewry. . . ." The author's description is somewhat misleading; many of the "young Jews" were members of a special group that included self-selected individuals who were participants in a touring German-Jewish Dance Theatre, "an example of . . . Jewish and German artists who consciously employed (their bodies) for understanding how their identities were linked to the memory of the Shoah."

Sub-titled "Encounters Between Young Jews and Germans," the book has been divided into two sections: "Memory and Identity" and "Reconciliatory Practices." Helped by almost two generations of earlier analogous studies, it has a simple enough goal, and one in some new ways promising, as the author pursues both the history and the current state of German-Jewish relationships. The promise, however, is not entirely fulfilled.

For Kröndorfer, a young German who studied theology in Germany and in the U.S. and who has taught religious studies at St. Mary's College in Maryland, the book came out of his own "as yet uncompleted journey into the rugged territory of post-Shoah Jewish/German relations." Give him credit for his earnest explorations of that frequently

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charted territory as he focuses on some of its hidden corners, but note that his work reads more as though it were an annotated doctoral thesis than as a book that should be about open, stirring, promising and, yes, spontaneous encounters between afflicted contemporaries.

Family histories are explored as U.S. summer programs on the Holocaust are shared by Jewish-American and German participants; the interactions of third and first generations are studied for their responses to oral Holocaust memories; the reactions of the third generation to public sites commemorating the past provide insights in a chapter entitled "From Generation to Generation"; the work of the Jewish-American and German artists of the joint Dance Theatre is used as a vehicle in soliciting audience responses to be studied; public reaction to reconciliatory efforts are highlighted; and in a final chapter, the study joins Jewish and German students on their visit to Auschwitz.

Yet something is missing. German students meet survivors, and young Jews engage Germans of all ages. We read about meetings, discourses, confrontations and performances both in the U.S. and in Germany, and we follow the arrangements (and the arguments) that are made to set all of these in motion. But the emphasis is too much on remembrance, and not enough on reconciliation. Too little emphasis on reconciliatory *practices* provides inadequate opportunities for the spontaneous and extended individual contacts that should have been the cornerstone of the study. Instead, these contacts appear too programmed, too supervised in their "performance," and too analyzed after completion. It is as though they were the long-observed mating dances of strange wildlife that has been choreographed for a National Geographic article—and, more disturbing still, perhaps programmed to appear fortuitous!

Nor is spontaneity incompatible with Kröndorfer's objective: "I came to believe that young Jews and Germans (not Israeli Jews, but American Jews, mind you) could . . . understand each other if they were provided with a *protected environment* (Italics mine).

> . . . My German upbringing (had) left me ignorant about Jews and bewildered when I first met them. Embarrassment, confusion, guilt, anger, attraction, shame, anxiety—Germans and Jews are entangled in these feelings when they confront each other, and too often they do not know how to begin to sort them out."

Telling is the experience by a young member of his group:

> "When Suzanne, upon meeting young Germans, said that she 'was . . . deeply dedicated not to compromise my history, my people, my self,' her sentiment echoes a discursive practice that insists that reevaluating one's relationship with Germans threatens Jewish identity. But at the end of four weeks of living and studying together with her German peers, Suzanne conceded that she had 'met some marvelous, open, warm, dedicated' Germans and could 'envision a future for our personal and political relationships,' and then wrote: "I have found a voice, but the proper audience has not really presented itself. It is time for me to go to find that audience, to construct it, and educate.' "

"When I arrived in the United States (at Temple University), at the age of twenty-four," Kröndorfer himself writes, "I was entirely unprepared for my encounter with Jews. . . . Somehow we did not reckon with the likelihood of actually meeting Jews! (Exclamation mark mine). . . . In Germany, our house was always open to visitors of various national and ethnic backgrounds, but I don't remember ever meeting a Jewish person. . . . Perhaps I met Jews without knowing it. . . . (Even when I toured Israel,) I was operating on the peculiar assumption that Israelis were somehow not Jews."

From personal experiences, I know this reflection to be accurate. The average middle-aged or younger German knows Jews either from classroom encounters in textbooks in those schools in which the Holocaust is discussed at all (if accurately), or as corpses in concentration camp photographs that have been shown in movies or on TV shows (or seen on family snapshots?!). One should, of course, support and understand the reluctance of Jews to make an appearance in Germany; their general absence, however, has contributed to the difficulties of reconciliation.

More damaging to the success of Kröndorfer's presentation is the fact that his writing is irritatingly marred by prolix prose and, too often, by what must be called—if uncharitably—psychobabble. For almost the first hundred pages, he talks at us in dry "PhD language" about the "cultural context within which Jewish/German relations have been shaped," as he examines the historical and psychological meaning and application of "discourse," "ethos," and "communitas." His written definition of these exemplify his literary style.

> "Liminality and communitas describe social conditions in which participants are encouraged to probe . . . and transform cultural values. The liminal mode . . . is highly creative and yet ambiguous. Individuals or

> societies can be sent to the 'limen' (the Latin word for threshold), an ambiguous state in which they go through transitions from one stage of . . . consciousness to another. . . . The notion of communitas guides our attention to the communal dimension of liminality. . . .
>
> "Whereas 'liminality may imply solitude rather than social intercourse,' communitas emphasizes that rituals are relational; *they take place between people. . . . Human bonding is the main nature of communitas* (Emphasis mine) . . . I am mainly interested here in spontaneous communitas. . ."

"Human bonding." Face to face. For the Nazis, the Jews had no faces, so the killers could believe they were not exterminating humans, but vermin. So should we not put the human face back? Reconciliation is conciliation, the effort to overcome distrust and animosity by means of a meeting (L.*concilium*). But in order to meet face to face, one needs the faces. In this book, there are not enough of them; by the time they do make a belated appearance, they have been preceded, and are still surrounded, by too much exposition.

Though he concludes that "ultimately . . . not the withholding of forgiveness, but repressed memory is the source of unresolved feelings," some relationships prosper; some suddenly fall victim again to bitter memory. Some progress is made; some wounds are re-opened. We are given a telling quote from Sammy Spier: "Behind the (German) fear . . . was . . . not the fear of opening the door to the parents' bedroom . . . but rather of opening the door to the gas chamber."

I believe that Kröndorfer permits preconceived expectations to invalidate his study, seemingly unwilling to travel the path from remembrance to reconciliation, and perhaps sharing his equivocation with the young people. Too often independent, individual thought appears subordinate to and subverted by conventional wisdom contemporaneously accepted, and free will subordinate to group determinism. Through the "experiments" at reconciliation runs the thread of a group hypnosis that has been reinforced by the author, who has permitted his own doubts to prejudge the likelihood of successful dialogue.

He argues that public discourse between Jews and Germans has become rhetorical and ritualized, and therefore critically resistant to change. Miscommmunication is inevitable as "true" meanings are lost; each party brings to the ritual its own interpretation of such crucial words as "victim," "victimizer," "guilt," and, of course, "reconciliation and memory." But he does not follow his own hypothesis to its proper conclusion.

Though the talk and the conclusions are about the urgent need for remembrance coupled with and leading to reconciliation, the implied theme throughout deals with guilt. One should therefore inquire into the relationship between remembrance and guilt, reconciliation and guilt, and, most important, between forgiveness and reconciliation.

The author struggles; ultimately he begs the question, seeing "guilt and forgiveness revealed in contradictory viewpoints and behaviors." "Some Germans reject the concept of guilt intellectually, but still yearn for forgiveness." He is angered because, for some, the call for forgiveness is an attempt at self-exoneration, implying that "the victims have a duty to forgive the victimizers." "Do Germans need forgiveness . . . to regain moral status with Jews?" "Guilt and forgiveness are ultimately caught in a defensive, circular system with nowhere to go. Forgiveness presumes guilt . . . and guilt thirsts for forgiveness... But forgiveness does not smother the memory of the Shoah. . . ." But it is not the victims we are talking about, it is the victims' descendants, troubled about extending forgiveness to the victimizers' "*innocent*" children. Guilt vs. innocence. The third generation of Germans: is it innocent or guilty?

In the much interpreted *Yom Kippur Musaf* and the *Kinnot* of *Tisha be'Av*, we read the tyrant's words: "Your fathers . . . where are they . . . that sold their brother . . . Ye shall now receive justice of Heaven upon you . . . ye bear on you your fathers' sins. . . ." In the Second Commandment, *Shemot* 20:5, and in the Thirteen Attributes, we are admonished that the Lord will "visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me."

For generations, commentators have grappled with these questions of "perpetual guilt." It can be argued (J.H. Hertz) that we must remember the "moral interdependence of parents and children, . . . (with) the most dreadful bequest to (the) children (being) . . . not a liability to punishment, but a liability to the commission of fresh offences." In the *ArtScroll Machzor*, Sherman, citing Biblical and Talmudic sources, provides commentary on the Commandment's "visit." Is it to be interpreted as "remembers" or as "punishes"? If the children continue to sin despite remembrance, then that ancestral legacy is an additional punishment. And though both Ramban and Rambam interpret that punishment to pertain only to idolatry, it is significant to see the general principle as the commentators agree that those who turn from the path of evil will be absolved, particularly since punishment for the parents' sins is contravened in other explicit Biblical passages.

Whereas remembrance may be linked with either punishment or forgiveness, it may lead to guilt feelings and anger. "While at Auschwitz," Kröndorfer writes, "the desire of third generation Germans not to be identified as German was at its strongest, yet the presence of Jewish peers threatened to expose their national identity. Shame surfaced in the widening crack between the desire to be a person free of a noxious history and the realization of one's inheritance from that poisonous past . . . how difficult it was to escape the ethos of guilt in which post-war generations of Germans have been raised."

Yet his own observations and hypotheses are contradicted repeatedly as he quotes Germans of all ages looking for reconciliation angrily or in frustration rejecting both the burden of collective guilt and the stigma of generational responsibility. Nor are these reactions unexpected. In a 1995 *New York Times Magazine* article, "The Sins of the Grandfathers," most of Peter Schneider's young German interviewees "vigorously denied that any personal guilt over the Holocaust was warranted," rejecting the feeling of "collective guilt" that "sneaked up" after visits to one of the concentration camps. "My parents already had nothing to do with it. I have even less to do with it."

But if these young Germans are ready for communitas with Jews, should we not accept that remembrance has led to self-evaluation by those who, though not acknowledging it, may feel that they still bear the burden of guilt? In turn, the burden of reconciliation is ours. Does it not require forgiveness for the sins of the fathers?!

"Reconciliation is not something that we possess, but that requires our struggle. . . . Reconciliatory practices attempt to mend the wounds between Jews and Germans by confronting a divisive past together. . . . Such encounters bring some hope." His words ring true, but his encounters fall short.

In *Things We Couldn't Say,* the title can be assumed to refer to the silence that occupying armies of war impose on the thoughts of the occupied. They drive these words "underground," from where, re-emerging "spoken," they do so as underground action. The book, written with James Schaap, a Professor of English at an Iowa college, appeared in 1994 in Michigan (where Eman now lives). It is not a profound book, but quiet, matter-of-fact conscience and faith-driven action rarely is.

Diet Eman's thoughts and actions during the Nazi conquest and occupation of Holland are this book, which represents the recollections of a young woman of deep Christian faith who risked her life—and frequently the lives of relatives and close friends—in successful efforts at

rescuing hundreds of Jews, non-Jews and downed British airmen from German death.

We see her as an "ordinary" woman, who, because of her convictions and her faith, for more than five fierce years defied and outwitted the Nazis. We observe as she moves through Holland, from one "safe" city apartment to another when the first is threatened; from city to small villages; from the villages to farms; and then, all too often, back to the cities. (Nor should the physical and tacit support of her devout family in the face of severe punishment be minimized.)

Carrying false papers, Eman goes by train, by bicycle, or on foot, finding some cooperative, some reluctant and some resistant families, spiriting the threatened into safe hiding places and finally accepting a role as a courier for the Dutch Underground, carrying letters, messages, general information, and even plans of military significance. And always, of course, there is the threat of betrayal by misstep or by those who have been approached for help.

Eman's almost daily diary entries from 1939 to 1945 are the basis for her recollections. Included in these, as well as separately, are letters exchanged with friends and (in a private code) with the fiance with whom she is very much in love (and who, also an Underground member, was apprehended late in the war and died in Dachau towards its end). Eman's frequent introspective religious reflections are interspersed, as are touching asides and occasional prayers; while she argues with a personal God in the face of apparently random brutal death, she never comes close to losing the faith which ultimately sustains her in the face of the daily abominations.

She is the agent of God even when she questions Him, and in her actions, Eman makes no distinction among victims, facing the need where it is, even as she can find humanity even among the victimizers. At her moment of greatest peril, interned and facing execution if exposed for what she pretends she is not, we share her thought of what will keep her alive: "You (Nazis) think you can decide on my life, but . . . you can't touch (me) without the will of God, my Father, because he is on my side."

Though brief recollections of daily historical occurrences help us make the transitions between episodes and bring the war back to mind, there are flashbacks that need to be inferred when they should have been laid out, creating some confusion as to the sequence of events—particularly in light of the book's episodic nature. Though it is possible, in the light of some chronological inconsistencies, that some of the recollections (even when based on a diary and letters) may not be com-

pletely accurate when seen through a fifty-year haze, and even probable that some embellishment may have been added to increase the book's luster, it is nevertheless an impressive documentary of quiet, conscious heroism in the face of likely death.

We read the names (and in accompanying photographs see the faces that go with some of them) of both the rescued and the doomed. A postscript re-acquaints us with those featured in the book—those who died, and the details of the lives of those who survived.

Two Holocaust books—one lives the horror, the other attempts to come to terms with its legacy. Its recollections border on the mundane even as heroism is recounted. Action is required, and the need for it makes questioning wasteful. The other book dissects, pursuing the abstract to the detriment of action. Everything is questioned, and not enough is accomplished.

REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE:

BEN EILBOTT left Germany in 1939 as a young boy. Currently active in many communal activities, he is a retired New York City school principal.