

BOOK REVIEWS

I Will Bear Witness—A Diary of the Nazi Years

by VICTOR KLEMPERER

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Reviewed by
Ben Eilbott

How does a rabbi's son, a convert to Christianity who frequently expresses his revulsion at Zionism, and on occasion equates it with Nazism, become the acclaimed spokesperson for Jewish suffering in Germany? How is a German "Jew," a caricature of the "*Yekke*" so despised by Eastern European Jewry, able to convince some of his readers that he has empathy for those he considers to be his intellectual and social inferiors? How does a converted Jew, seen by Germans as vermin to be exterminated, proclaim himself to be more German than they—to be the real German? How does a two-volume diary of almost one thousand printed pages, describing twelve years of accelerating horror, and recording in unsparing detail the irrevocable end of German Jewry, hold the reader's unflagging attention, while succeeding, at the same time, in convincing some reviewers that many entries in the diaries exonerate Goldhagen's "ordinary" German, yet proving to others that they substantiate that all Germans were indeed "willing executioners"?

How does a diarist, whose writings betray him as an arrogant, self-styled intellectual contemptuous of *hoi polloi*, become the voice of Holocaust survivors and the darling of literary reviews? How does a hypochondriac, loving no one but his wife and himself, convicted by his own words of contempt for humanity in general, and shown repeatedly to be utterly self-absorbed and almost unfeeling in the face of enveloping horror, Bear Witness?

Victor Klemperer, son of a rabbi, part of a family of which several members achieved international renown, was appointed chair of Romance languages at Dresden Technical University in 1920. Some years earlier he had converted to Protestantism; at 25 he married Eva, a musician from a Protestant family. Klemperer's marriage, rather than his conversion, would ultimately save his life, for it entitled him to the status of "privileged" Jew, as Eva's family was one in which no amount of

Nazi research would have succeeded in unearthing any but pureblooded Aryan ancestors.

After Hitler took power in 1933, the Holocaust that his words in *Mein Kampf* had all but guaranteed began gradually to be implemented. At the start, only those who were personally affected by the first anti-Jewish edicts, and those wise enough to read the future without self-delusion, felt threatened. Despite the uncertainty, false hopes, and contradictions that riddled Klemperer's daily musings throughout the Nazi years, he soon became convinced that the short-term future for him and his beloved Germany was grim indeed. Though for years he tried to persuade himself and intimates—despite his own continual doubts and false expectations—that in the long term the real Germany would re-emerge, his diary entries daily give the lie to his hopes.

He had been keeping journals throughout his life; the arrival of Hitler did not change that, but convinced him to begin a different kind of diary, one that would document the daily cruelties regularly announced by government regulations and implemented with enthusiasm by all too many. The two-volume diaries, translated and edited by Martin Chalmers, cover the period from 1933 to 1945, beginning with Hitler's election as Chancellor and ending shortly after Germany's surrender. Almost daily entries were made in the face of clear evidence (emphatic by 1942) that the discovery of the diaries in an SS search would cost Klemperer his life, and would seriously threaten others mentioned by him. As Klemperer wrote on May 27, 1942:

This afternoon Eva is going . . . to fetch some money. I shall give her the diary pages of the last few weeks to take with her. After the house search I found several books . . . lying on the desk. If one of them had been the Greek dictionary, if the manuscript had fallen out and had thus aroused suspicion, it would undoubtedly have meant my death. One is murdered for lesser misdemeanors... But I shall go on writing. That is my heroism. I will bear witness, precise witness!

It is important to note that in his acknowledgment of the lethal danger facing him if the pages were to be discovered, Klemperer makes no reference to the terrible consequences for those caught possessing or transporting them, as well as for all those he had compromised by naming them in his entries. Pseudonyms or initials could easily have been employed, so one must wonder how much of the writing was done with an eye toward eventual publication (and Klemperer's never-ending quest for recognition and praise). Indeed, one must wonder whether

Klemperer himself knew what lay behind his self-proclaimed need to “bear witness,” whether it was not driven by the parodied, archetypal German pedant’s determination to memorialize himself through an intellectual exercise.

Of particular interest to Klemperer the diarist were the stunning untruths, distortions, and inventions, out of which a regime, bent on an unprecedented course of evil, wove a fabric for the “greater good” of its people. To him, the fascination of the political manifestations of Nazism, and its perverted use of the German language, were almost paramount. In his diary entry of March 17, 1942, at a time when the deportations and mass murder surrounding Klemperer had become commonplace, he writes: “Two things interest me: the rise of National Socialism and the history of Zionism. (I shall not even mention LTI. It’s always there.)”

LTI is the language of the Third Reich, or *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, and Klemperer’s notes and observations of it led to the publication of a highly praised linguistic study in 1947. (His preoccupation with the essence of Zionism will be discussed later.)

Nevertheless, while the force and influence of the diaries must be acknowledged, worth mentioning, too, is the unpleasant dichotomy between Klemperer the diarist and Klemperer the man, between his actions and his words. While failings of character might not call into question the events he so scrupulously describes (though on occasion they appear to have been remembered with an almost supernatural ability at recall, if not with hindsight), it was profoundly disquieting for this reviewer, who brought his own history of Holocaust survival to his reading, to separate the man’s character from his observations.

Klemperer reveals himself to be understanding, yet self-centered; cultured, yet prejudiced with the most stereotypical views of humanity; loving to his wife, yet jealously lacking in generosity of spirit. And as preoccupied as the entries show him to be with his health, his meals, his finances, and his reputation, his zealous need for scholarly and intellectual recognition is an almost neurotic compulsion, so that one could believe that to the very end he would have wanted to be addressed as “Herr Professor.”

May 15, 1945: Then I told her in a low voice, and in a few words, who I was. . . . Immediately smiling courtesy . . . and expression of respect. One “Herr Professor” after another. . . .

For Victor, conflicted thoughts—fear of Germany and pride in

being German—never end, and pervade, and in part determine, his daily actions.

May 15, 1941: Despite everything I emphatically declared my commitment to Germanness. “No one will believe you.” It is not a question of what others believe . . . my conscience alone is the judge of my Germanness.

May 11, 1942: I am fighting the hardest battle for my Germanness now . . . I am German, the others are un-German. I must hold on to this: The spirit is decisive, not blood. . . . On my part Zionism would be a comedy—my baptism was not a comedy.

May 30, 1942: I am German and am waiting for the Germans to come back; they have gone to ground somewhere.

Counterpoint to his “Germanness” and his elite intellectualism are his feelings about Zionism.

April 22, 1935: I disagreed violently [with Blumenfeld] about Zionism, which he defends and praises, which I call betrayal and Hitlerism.

January 1, 1939: Eva was intensely annoyed because (an acquaintance) said nothing would get any better until we had a Jewish state somewhere in the world. Certainly that is pure Nazism and just as odious to me as it is to her.

November 12, 1939: The Jewish communities in Germany today are all extremely inclined to Zionism. I shall go along with that just as little as I do with National Socialism or with Bolshevism. Liberal and German forever.

May 26, 1940: The usual conversations for and against Zionism, which I equated with Hitlerism.

Note that the entries of January 1, 1939, and November 12, 1939 were both recorded after the *Kristallnacht* atrocities of November 10, 1938.

The German regime had orchestrated the *Kristallnacht* atrocities ostensibly because a distraught Polish Jew had assassinated one of its diplomats in Paris. As with the Reichstag fire, it was a transparent excuse to implement what had long been planned. Klemperer’s only references to what were country-wide pogroms were made on the succeeding November 22, and on New Year’s Eve of 1939 in summing up the year 1938.

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November 22, 1938: First illness, then the car accident, then, following the Grünspan shooting business in Paris, there came persecution, and since then the struggle (whether) to emigrate.

December 31, 1938: I believe the pogroms of November '38 made less impression on the nation than cutting the bar of chocolate for Christmas.

Thus Klemperer, in his diary, was no more impressed by the pogrom than he determines the nation to have been.

It was also Victor's choice to remain in Germany, and to see himself as German.

May 16, 1936: During my last year in my post I swore an oath to Hitler [to keep his position], I have remained in the country—I am no better than my fellow Aryan creatures.

January 8, 1938: But what is the point of it all [emigration]? It is not only that there are no prospects, but I am afraid of the prospects. Eva and the house and the garden . . . how could it all work out? But what is going to happen here?

November 28, 1938 [speaking to a sympathetic army major in charge of emigration]: He: "Were the situation to change tomorrow . . . then you would be sorry to have gone."—From his explanations, it emerged that they really would let us out stripped and naked and with seven and a half percent of the proceeds of (our) house.

April 20, 1939: [Brother Georg Klemperer] has made a very promising contact (in London), will be able to say something definite in June . . . and hopes to see me . . . in the USA...before the year is out. I do not know if that is what I want. As I said, I am burying myself in Curriculum and Romains.

June 9, 1941: Shall I expedite our emigration. . . . Long painful consultation with Eva. She said, over there she would have no hope of ever again finding a life of her own, there she would only be able to sit around and go to the cinema, nothing else. Here at least she still retained some hope. I myself fear dependence on relatives. . . . We shall do nothing . . . and continue to wait and see as "obstinately" as before.

September 17, 1941: I have had no more news from Änny Klemperer [sister-in-law] for months. Perhaps she took offense (when) I wrote, I was not very enthusiastic about emigration. I had suffered enough in my youth from financial dependence on family.

By 1942 all exits had closed, but long before that Klemperer had subconsciously sabotaged all emigration opportunities: His English was inadequate; he would be unable to obtain a position that would honor his qualifications and achievements; he would be dependent on others for financial assistance; Eva's poor health and her attachment to their house, and, after that had been seized, to her friends, made leaving too difficult. There were many other reasons that he advanced (mostly to himself), but these recurred in his diaries most often.

I believe that these and a host of other justifications reflected more than just his inability to decide. By remaining in the country he would prove that he was the true German, and that the "others"—impostors destroying Germany's good name and history—would soon be supplanted and destroyed. Surrounded by worsening atrocities and the evidence of concentration camp murders, as well as the increasing likelihood of his own doom, he continued to tell himself and others that the regime would topple or be toppled, that sanity would return and the madness soon end.

But it must be acknowledged and emphasized that to the reader of the diaries whose acquaintance with the Holocaust has relied on journalism, visual images and personal histories, Klemperer's character, personality, and idiosyncrasies are not really of significance. It is the shattering power of the diaries that takes precedence over unkind thoughts. Meticulously they detail both the mundane and the ghastly, as day after unprecedented day the noose tightens around the Jews. We live within the mesmerizing entries, observing the slow progression of lethal edicts that accelerate toward their carefully planned objective—a tidal wave of words that carries all of us into destruction.

The books reduce to its simplest terms what, as early as with the entry of August 14, 1942, he calls "remorseless, cultivated cruelty." Although the official Nazi edicts are not recorded as written below, we have summarized some of them from the diaries:

You are Jewish, so for now, until that day on which we will come for you to take you with us on a visit to Dachau or Buchenwald, or to Theresienstadt, where we will stay briefly before we move on together to Auschwitz and Treblinka, we ask that you wear a Jewish star and a yellow armband on those occasions when you are permitted to leave your house, but that you do not enter a private moving vehicle or use public transportation, and that you do not walk along streets designat-

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ed for Aryans only. We have set aside special "Jews' houses," so that with frequent unannounced inspection visits we can make certain that no instant deportation will be required if in your room we should discover a pet, a forbidden book, a typewriter or a sewing machine, or foods or clothes of a nature or quantity not permitted on a Jew's ration card. All telephone service has been disconnected, and a curfew will prohibit you from leaving your house without permission after 8 P.M., or "visiting other residents of the house, spending time in the entrance hall or on the stairs." Of course you will find the means to pay the special "Jew tax." You may not . . . , you can not . . . , you will not. . . .

In May of 1940 Victor and Eva had been expelled from their house and forced into one of the Jews' Houses, a relocation which soon was mandated for all in the ever-smaller Dresden Jewish community. In these houses the occupants were confined to one room or to very small apartments, and, by being centrally gathered, could easily be monitored, searched, harassed and, of course, tracked and deported without much difficulty.

Klemperer's marriage to a pure-blooded Aryan afforded him many "privileges." Eva's ration card provided her (and with circumspection, Victor) with less limited access to food and clothing, and made public transportation available to her. That in the ever more frequent deportation roundups of the dwindling Jewish population he was repeatedly passed over, was assumed by him (and must be by us) to be exclusively attributable to his wife's status, which in turn conferred on him the rank of "privileged Jew."

Early in 1942, and again for several months in 1943, Klemperer was conscripted for work duties, first for menial labor at snow clearing, later for simple duties in a factory. In the latter environment he reported encountering many sympathetic non-Jewish workers, some of whom he described as protecting him against his obvious incompetence at even the most unskilled tasks. After the authorities eventually granted him a work exemption because of his poor health, he was curiously never included in deportation orders that so commonly selected in particular the ill and the old.

Eventually, and almost miraculously, however, he owed his life to the Allied fire bombing of Dresden in February of 1945. It killed thousands of residents, but it saved his life and the lives of the few dozen Jews then still in the city. When all of the municipal buildings and the records they contained were destroyed, Victor could remove his Jewish star and yellow armband, and he and Eva were among those able to assume new identities. With the war's end still three months away, however, three

months during which the regime accelerated its mad, irrational aim of total Jewish extermination, it became essential for them to leave the city in which Victor could at any moment be recognized as Professor Klemperer, and to remain away until their safe return could be assured.

Their odyssey, by train and bus, on rides provided by strangers in cars and on carts, but predominantly on foot, took them through southern Germany. Victor and Eva leap-frogged to the sector being controlled by the U.S., helped in small towns along the way by friends and acquaintances and former colleagues. The diaries' details of their brief stopovers in successive small villages provide a fascinating and revealing portrait of the chaos and consequences of a war's end. Memory suddenly dims for the vanquished, and recollections disappear for the collaborators. The fall of Nazism, in the ultimate irony, meant that to be Jewish was the password to acceptance, while the Jewish star had become almost a badge of heroism, one that Victor did not hesitate to use to advantage.

After the German surrender, the Klemperers' return trip to Dresden was alternately obstructed and aided by American bureaucrats and military personnel (about whom Klemperer occasionally expresses unkind supercilious thoughts). Not too far from home they entered the Russian zone (soon to be part of East Germany) and had scattered encounters with Soviet soldiers (though Klemperer's invidious observations about them are not substantiated by anecdotal evidence). These diaries, and Victor and Eva's journey, conclude in Dölzsch, as the Klemperers return to, and once again take possession of, their beloved little house.

Klemperer soon joined the Communist Party, despite the severe criticism he continued to make of Russian policy, and the parallels he saw between Nazism and Communism. In his preface, Martin Chalmers observes:

There are . . . reasons . . . that persuaded Klemperer to join the Communist Party. One was very practical. To get full recognition as a "victim of Fascism" he had to join a political party.

In 1947, indeed, he was reappointed a professor at Dresden's Technical University, and in subsequent years accepted other professorial positions and honorary degrees. He continued with his journals throughout his life, until his death in 1960. While a German edition of the entries of post-war 1945 is available, we do not yet have the records of the final years, though they are being prepared for publication. There has been controversy in the interpretation of the diaries. In contrast to those for whom much of the diaries' record confirms that

Goldhagen was right in his thesis that the ordinary German was a "willing executioner," there are just as many who conclude, on the basis of other entries, that there were average Germans, who, though perhaps willfully ignorant of the horror, were, when confronted individually, able to display kindness, psychological support, and, in more than isolated circumstances, some quiet heroism.

In a careful reading of the books we find (as this reviewer can confirm) that even among the SS there were occasionally those who looked the other way, while throughout the long twelve years covered by the diaries, Klemperer cites repeated instances of good deeds by neighbors, shopkeepers, professionals and even casual passersby. On the other hand, there were gratuitous acts of savage cooperation, also by average citizens; there was casual, superfluous brutality by others, especially by the young; and there were the small, deliberate blows of humiliation that daily continued to invade the soul and poison the will of the ever-diminishing number of Jews that tried clinging to life.

So there is a balance. Faced with the horror that the diaries substantiate, some readers may not be able—or willing—to suspend their belief in mass guilt. Others can cite as evidence for individual, rather than mass, culpability, entries that describe non-Jews risking fines or imprisonment (or worse) by extending illegal assistance.

A balance must extend also to our assessment of Klemperer. Yes, this reviewer sees Victor Klemperer as arrogant, self-centered, and blind to his shortcomings. But the power of the diaries makes the personal shortcomings irrelevant, for they do not impinge on the dreadful truth of the written words.

Jewish Writers/Irish Writers: Selected Essays on the Love of Words by MAURICE WOHLGELERNTER
(New Brunswick & London, Transaction Books, 2000),
196 pp.

Reviewed by
Moshe Kohn

When I was book-review editor of *The Jerusalem Post* in the 1970s, I tried to devote much of the space at my disposal to what one member of my "stable" of reviewers disparagingly defined as "The Elephant and the Jewish Problem."

What kind of book-review section did I seek to run? First and foremost, with the limited number of quality Anglophone reviewers available in Israel, I saw no purpose in trying to compete with the leading overseas literary journals and supplements with their full stables of distinguished critics. Therefore, I tried to get reviewed books that I thought were likely to be, or should be, of special interest to Israeli readers in general, but particularly to Jewish readers, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the *Post's* readership. Then there were the worthwhile books of a general nature, but without any obvious, immediate Jewish or Israeli ramifications—books of poetry by important poets; novels or story collections by serious writers; historical and political works—that were being discussed in the major intellectual centers of the world. In such instances, I saw no purpose in merely adding one more general review of the sort that might have been published in, say, the *London Times Literary Supplement*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Kenyon Review*, and the like. I thought the *Post* ought to make its unique contribution to the critical discussion by having its reviewers treat the book not only as regards its intrinsic value, but also, wherever appropriate, from an Israeli and/or Jewish perspective.

I felt that just as there were respectable, distinguished literary critics who brought to bear their American or British or French, and Catholic or Existentialist or Marxist, perspectives on their discussions of novels, histories, political treatises, and even poetry, so might Israeli Jewish critics view books from their particular perspective. Indeed, I felt that doing so was the obligation of an Israeli Zionist English-language newspaper—the only one at that time, and which also published what was then the *Post's* “Overseas Airmail Edition.”

Curiously, I enjoyed very little success. A distinguished professor of history who undertook to review a certain work after apparently agreeing with my approach, gave me a vitriolic dressing down when I returned his review because it had not said a single word about the “Jewish angle,” which was highly relevant to the subject of the book. Even a *kippa*-wearing Orthodox professor of literature—the above-mentioned disparager of my suggestion—feared that doing what I requested in his reviews of novels would diminish his stature in the eyes of his colleagues.

I see this person's reaction to my request, as well as the similar reaction of most of the other reviewers to whom I broached it, as having a twofold self-denigrating implication. Firstly, it implied that Jewishness and Judaism have nothing to do with a world outlook, a vision of life, and are

no more than an unfortunate accident of birth and a pointless code of ritual observance. Secondly, it implied that an Israeli Jewish reviewer must treat his subjects primarily from a universalistic perspective, and only secondarily—if at all—may he bring his Israeli perspective to bear.

It thus gives me great joy to say that in the book under review, Rabbi Professor Maurice Wohlgernter offers us further proof, if further proof be needed, that there is, indeed, a Judaic vision. The book shows, moreover, that it is possible to enhance one's critical faculties by applying this vision. Finally, it shows that this vision provides perspectives no less valid than those traditionally acceptable to the academic and literary-critical establishments, and that these perspectives can give us insights no less significant than those of the others.

Indeed, as a member of the Jewish faith-people that is still under siege everywhere and living in a homeland that is still—again—in mortal danger, I consider it a matter of physical and spiritual *pikuah nefesh* to examine things through the prism of the Judaic vision in order to gain the insights that this vision makes possible.

This book is also further proof, if further proof be needed, that Wohlgernter is the man to guide us to those insights. He succeeds as brilliantly as he does at this task, of course, because of his broad and profound knowledge of, and empirical experience with, the Judaic tradition (as a disciple of the Rav and as a communal rabbi), and because of his equally broad and profound familiarity and experience with the arts of writing and reading (as a seeking and articulate individual and as professor of English and the humanities at universities in the U.S. and Israel).

Jewish Writers/Irish Writers is a collection of essays previously published in various journals, including *Tradition*. Indeed, a good place to start this review is Wohlgernter's comments, first published in these pages three decades ago, on two autobiographical works: critic-editor Norman Podhoretz's *Making It* and teacher-comedian Sam Levenson's *Everything But Money*.

Norman Podhoretz and Sam Levenson in one breath?! Can Wohlgernter be serious? He himself introduces his comparison by asking the devil's question: "How is it possible to compare say, the measured cadences of Leavisian [F.R. Leavis, a leading literary critic of his day and professor at Cambridge where Podhoretz studied] rhetoric with the prosaic comments of a former high-school teacher of Spanish?"—

Podhoretz—"bright, sharp, precocious—who brashly invaded the New York literary world and, with the proper help, won the battle," with Levenson, then an "established comic moving in . . . cafe society."

Wohlgelernter is indeed serious, as only a man of his erudition and Judaic vision can be. We have here two children of poor Jewish immigrant families—Podhoretz's in Brownsville and Levenson's in Harlem, when both of these New York City neighborhoods had vibrant Jewish communities. (Aside: Brownsville then had a Herzl Street, and Harlem had a yeshiva, known—yes—as Yeshiva de-Harlem.) Both men "made it to the top of their professions"—Podhoretz as a much-sought literary critic and eventually editor of the prestigious *Commentary* magazine, and Levenson as "a funny man appearing on all the major networks of the country."

The Norman Podhoretz of today is much more sensitive and articulate regarding Jewish concerns than the Norman Podhoretz of *Making It* appears to have been. The earlier Podhoretz, Wohlgelernter notes, "deliberately cut himself off from his parents and what they represented. . . . Hence, when his mother saw him in all his glory as writer and editor, she could hardly recognize him." Wohlgelernter quotes Podhoretz's observation that his mother perceived that "whereas Jewish sons who grow up to be successes in certain occupations usually remain fixed in an accessible cultural ethos, sons who grow up into literary successes are transformed almost beyond recognition and distanced almost beyond a mother's reach."

Wohlgelernter now comments: "But distance, however commendable to aesthetics, is not, needless to say, indigenous to a Jewish ethos. For such distance separates one not only from his past but also from his present, and perhaps even from himself."

Levenson, on the other hand, nostalgically and proudly boasts that in his childhood home he "was heir to an ancient tradition of learning." He recalls his mother's lighting of the *Shabbat* candles on Friday evening, a moment when he and his siblings "could feel the metamorphosis of a weekday into a holy day. . . ."

Wohlgelernter also refers to Levenson's "warm and immensely accurate description of the seder night... It shows a man who, despite all his fame, could still claim, during the retelling of the Exodus, that he 'belonged to history and history belonged to [him].'"

If this and other observations of Levenson's regarding education and the simple virtues amount to lowbrow sentimentalism, Wohlgelernter writes, then perhaps it is precisely this "'sentimentalism' of home, of respect for parents, teachers, learning, and the absolute need

to clean up the dirty places left by some students and their instructors who claim to be 'highbrow' [that] might be the crying need of our time." That is a comment still timely three decades after it was written.

As I noted above, Podhoretz ultimately did not separate himself "from his present" or "from himself." And Wohlgelernter clearly states that Levenson's book "lacks the style, grace, learning, and literary significance" of Podhoretz's.

Wohlgelernter also discusses several works of fiction and non-fiction on the Holocaust; works by American Jewish novelists Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Herbert Gold, and Robert Kotlowitz; Irish writers Frank O'Connor, Brendan Behan and (American) Peter Hamill; and several autobiographical works in addition to those of Podhoretz and Levenson. He also gives us a brilliant and laudatory comparison of two works on the Mendel Beiliss case (and on anti-Jewish blood libel and anti-Semitism in general), Maurice Samuel's historical work, *Blood Accusation*, and Bernard Malamud's novel, *The Fixer*.

Wohlgelernter tells us: "Malamud, sensitive to history as well as art, understood, deep in his creative conscience, that suffering for all mankind alone cannot be equated with Jewishness. Nor is it the suffering of humiliated egos or the gnawing fears of poverty that makes one a Jew. It is the suffering of violence just for *being* a Jew, for *being* of the tribe of Abraham, for entering the covenant of *being different*—that is the distinguishing mark of Jewishness [*italics all his*]. . . ."

In a certain respect, the *piece de resistance* of the book is Wohlgelernter's scathing open letter to Ari Goldman, former *New York Times* star and now a professor at Columbia University's journalism school, on his autobiographical *The Search For God at Harvard*. In this book, Goldman tells of the role his year at the Harvard Divinity School played in shaping his adult outlook and his journalistic ethos.

It must have hurt Wohlgelernter to write this letter, because of his close association with Goldman's family. However, being the Jew and teacher he is, he apparently could not remain silent in the face of Goldman's *hutspa*.

Goldman, himself an alumnus of Yeshiva University and the son and nephew of distinguished alumni, describes himself as a "Sabbath observer," And yet gives himself a *hetter* to hurry downtown one *Shabbat* morning to do a story on the death of a famous personage in the bosom of his mistress. "I have a moral responsibility," Goldman writes, "to report the news, and Jewish law might have to bend to

accommodate my vocation.” Wohlgelernter comments: “A glaring example of the Div School’s ‘religious relativism.’”

In my own close to fifty years in journalism, I have heard many pretentious proclamations about the nature of my profession. But Goldman’s is the first suggestion that Jewish journalists have an automatic dispensation to profane *Shabbat* on grounds tantamount to that of *pikuah nefesh*.

I have two minor criticisms of *Jewish Writers/Irish Writers*. Because of the title, I expected more than three brief chapters, covering a mere 23 pages, on Irish writers. I also thought I would find some treatment of the affinity that has been noted between Irish writing and Yiddish writing. I also think that Wohlgelernter peppers his writing with too many allusions, in quotation marks, cited from the works of many other writers. He is a fine enough artist to rely on his own words and the phrases he himself shapes.

***Rational Rabbis* by MENACHEM FISCH
(Indiana University Press, 1997), 263 pp.**

Reviewed by
Moshe Koppel

In the philosopher Karl Popper’s idealization of the scientific process, all scientific claims are offered as tentative hypotheses to be replaced by other (equally tentative) hypotheses when they are falsified, i.e., contradicted by observed facts. In *Rational Rabbis*, Menachem Fisch argues that, at least according to one view, this tentativeness is a feature of the halakhic process as well.

Fisch contrasts two views of the halakhic process which he calls “traditionalism” and “anti-traditionalism,” respectively. As Fisch defines them, traditionalists are “unflinchingly dogmatic in preserving their legacies.” In contrast, anti-traditionalists (the good guys) view the Oral Torah as “at all times the tentative, hesitant, conjectured product of ongoing human exegetical and judicial reasoning” which must be “troubleshoot” when laws prove to be inadequate. Fisch is aware that there is no accessible halakhic “reality” against which to test halakhic hypotheses in the way that there is a physical reality against which to test scientific hypotheses. He argues, however, that Popper’s notion of falsification can be generalized to a notion of “failure of [a] system to

achieve its intended goals” which is applicable to halakha. What these “intended goals” might be in the case of halakha he does not say.

Fisch argues that a clear understanding of the distinction between traditionalism and anti-traditionalism is essential for an understanding of various halakhic and meta-halakhic discussions in talmudic literature. More controversially, Fisch argues that the anonymous framers of the *Talmud Bavli* were trying to convey an anti-traditionalist message to the discerning reader; the very form of argumentation of the *Bavli* is meant as a lesson in subversiveness. Fisch attempts to prove his case by marshalling several related talmudic stories in which the *Tannaim* themselves reflect upon the halakhic process. He also analyzes in depth one technical halakhic *sugya* in the *Bavli* in which he finds support for his case implicit in the very framing of the *sugya*.

The strongest part of the book is Fisch’s juxtaposition of a number of well-known *aggadot* associated with the mini-revolt against Rabban Gamliel in post-hurban Yavneh. These include R. Elazar ben Azaria’s opening of the academy to all who wished to study (*Berakhot* 28a), the collection of halakhic traditions which formed the basis of *Tractate Eduyot* and the voting upon them (*Berakhot* 28a), the rejection of R. Eliezer’s tradition (and divine intervention on its behalf) in favor of majority vote in the case of *tannuro shel akhmai* (*Bava Metsia* 59b), R. Yehoshua’s public acceptance of Rabban Gamliel’s ruling against R. Yehoshua’s reasoned arguments (*Rosh Hashana* 25a), R. Eliezer’s cursing of his students for reporting as a result of a vote a law which he had actually received as a tradition (*Hagiga* 3b), and others. Fisch analyzes each of these stories thoroughly, taking careful note of variant readings and other linguistic subtleties. What emerges is a clear picture of two schools of meta-halakhic thought: the school typified by R. Eliezer which emphasizes above all the reliable transmission of tradition and the school typified by R. Yehoshua which emphasizes proper legislative procedure. Fisch’s conclusion that these schools can be identified with those of traditionalism and anti-traditionalism (as he defines them) takes a great deal for granted, however. We do not know that R. Eliezer rejects all possible criteria for falsification and we certainly do not know that R. Yehoshua would consider rejection of an uncontested, unambiguous tradition. Fisch’s tendency to exaggerate the gap between what might more aptly be called “conservative” and “progressive” schools is a serious flaw which we will discuss further below.

In the most sustained single argument in the book, Fisch argues that a careful analysis of the *sugya* in *Berakhot* 19b reveals a hidden anti-tradi-

