

BOOK REVIEWS:

Lawrence N. Powell, *Troubled Memory: Anne Levy, the Holocaust, and David Duke's Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2000), 578 pp., illus.

The "Americanization" of the Holocaust, the attempt to infuse the Holocaust with significance for American culture and politics, has provoked public controversy, particularly since the opening the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Quite often this controversy has pitted Jews against African Americans in a competition for status as victims of racism. Peter Novick's latest book, *The Holocaust in American Life*, even suggests that commemoration of the Holocaust pushes American Jewish politics in a reactionary direction. Rather than address the relationship between racism in Germany and America through general comparisons, Powell focuses his book on the life of one Holocaust survivor and her family.

Anne Skorecki Levy hid from the Nazis as a child in Poland and survived to speak out against David Duke as a grandmother in Louisiana. Her life bridges two eras of racial strife: Polish and German antisemitism during World War II and the resurgence of American racism manifest in David Duke's 1991 gubernatorial campaign. For Powell, this is a redemptive story. It shows that in the hands of an active citizenry, memory of the Holocaust can help to forge an ethical alliance against racism. If Powell had subordinated Anne Levy's experiences to this moral, *Troubled Memory* would be didactic and flat. *Troubled Memory* presents life in the round. This complexity is the book's greatest achievement. On one level, *Troubled Memory* is fundamentally a family saga. It recounts the Skorecki family's rise in prewar Poland, its suffering during the Holocaust, and its successful reestablishment in the United States. Like any family saga, the story of the Skoreckis is about the interplay of heritage, personality, and circumstance in the creation of identity. Because the Skoreckis were Polish Jews caught in the Holocaust, the need for concealment and calculation in dealing with the outside world shapes the identity of all the family members. Powell is particularly sensitive in exploring the relationship between the Skoreckis' strategies for surviving the war and strategies for achieving their prewar social aspirations.

The Skoreckis were an educated bourgeois family. Even their name was Polish rather than Jewish, a fact that would help the family pass as Aryans. Mark Skolecki was the son of a family that had been in the wood trade for generations. His wife, Ruth, hoped to raise their children, Anne and Lila, with a cultivated appreciation of theater and the arts. The family lived in Lodz at the outbreak of World War II. In the course of the war they traveled to Warsaw, where they were perhaps the only family to survive the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto with all its members. After smuggling themselves out of the ghetto the family lived "on the surface." Ruth and the children even attended mass and hosted a Christmas party in their efforts to pass as Christian Poles. Powell suggests that Ruth's heightened awareness of appearances, which made fur coats and other status symbols so important to her before the war, came to her aid as she hid herself and her family.

Ruth hid Anne and Lila sometimes in trunks or wardrobes, sometimes in plain sight, as the family tried to blend into its Christian surroundings. When the family lived "on the surface," the darker Anne hid in the home of a friendly Christian. The fairer Lila accompanied her mother to church. Comforted by the ritual of the mass, she developed a real attachment to the Catholic religion. After the war her parents literally reimposed a Jewish identity on her. Her father even snatched a Catholic missal from her hands and threw it into the fire. The reestablishment of a clear Jewishness seemed as painful and wrenching as maintaining a dual identity.

Once the family relocated to the United States, Ruth's talent for social adaptation helped them acculturate in the conformist 1950s. Meanwhile, according to Powell, the habit of obedience remained deeply ingrained in the children's personalities. Even as adolescents in America they conformed to their parents' wishes. Only David Duke's denial of the Holocaust impelled Anne to overcome years of self-repression and make her experiences public. The child who had crouched silently in a trunk for hours became a woman who dared to confront a seasoned politician publicly. Anne relentlessly challenged Duke to explain his Holocaust denial. Her questions helped make Duke's racist past the defining issue of the campaign.

Powell brings a historian's training to these events. At every turn in the story he contextualizes the family's experiences in the broader social circumstances of the period. This approach makes for a very

long book, but it also takes *Troubled Memory* beyond the confines of family saga or personal memoir. Powell draws on material outside the Skoreckis' experience. His chapters on the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, include a detailed and lucid account of conditions there and of the uprising.

In these sections Powell explores his second theme: the relationship between extraordinary heroism, such as the uprising, and the more ordinary heroism of caring for family and, where possible, neighbors. It was one of the tragedies of the choices Hitler's regime imposed on Jews that these virtues might conflict. The resources spent on arms, Powell notes, might have been spent saving individual lives. But probably not for long. In the end, either kind of heroism was likely to prove futile. Powell presents these moral choices in all their complexity without looking for pure heroes or villains.

Troubled Memory is that rare work, a history intended for both a professional and a popular audience. Evidence of Powell's considerable research is relegated to unobtrusive footnotes. He adopts the voice of an omniscient narrator, telling us what each individual in his story thought or felt. Although some academics will find this style annoying, it makes the book easily accessible. *Troubled Memory* synthesizes a great body of information on the Holocaust and on the experience of survivors in America. If you must choose only one book on the Holocaust for a course on ethics, identity, immigration, or American politics, *Troubled Memory* has the depth and complexity to provoke a great class discussion.

Sonia Spear is a doctoral candidate in religion at Indiana University.