

12-2020

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Recommended Citation

Horowitz, Brian (2020) "Book Review: Rachmil Bryks, *May God Avenge Their Blood: A Holocaust Memoir Triptych*," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 10 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss10/6>

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BOOK REVIEW

Rachmil Bryks, *May God Avenge Their Blood: A Holocaust Memoir Triptych*, trans. Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, New York: Lexington Books, 2020. Pages: 272 p.; ISBN: 978-1-7936-2102-3 (Hardback); 978-1-7936-2103-0 (e-Book)

Reviewed by Brian Horowitz, Tulane University

If there were justice in the literary world, this moment would be noticed by many: a new translation of Rachmil Bryks' works has appeared. Instead of celebrating a literary event of the top order, one confronts a question: "Who is Rachmil Bryks?"

Sadly, one has to educate an English-language readership. He was a famous Yiddish writer who wrote a great deal about the Holocaust in Poland. He grew up in Skarżysko-Kamienna, Poland, among Hasidim, and moved to Łódź, where ultimately, he survived the ghetto. In 1946, he went to Sweden and from there to the United States. He lived nearly two decades in New York City until his untimely death in 1978. His many books in Yiddish can be acquired free of charge (download) from the National Yiddish Book Center.

Admittedly, there are many great writers of the Holocaust, so what makes Bryks a stand-out? For me, it is his range. He has pieces that pay compliments to Shalom Aleichem ("Those Who Didn't Survive") and other pieces that share traits from Ahron Appelfeld. However, many of his works, such as the *Holocaust Triptych*, resemble Tadeusz Borowski. In my opinion, Borowski was the finest of all. His enigmatic, condensed, and sparing style hinted at depths that readers were asked to imagine, to fill in the silence left by the author. Borowski told what he saw in flashes and narrow slices, but with great precision and intricate detail. But by leaving out his analysis, he forced the reader to sort out the horrors and draw his/her own conclusions. Thus, readers became contributors to the text. It was an effective system.

Bryks is a bit like that. He is a writer, not a philosopher, theologian, moralist, or historian. His material is always local, visits to family, descriptions of relatives, neighbors, or strangers encountered in the here and now. The material in this book is all biographical, in the "Triptych" he describes his journeys during the first days of war, his arrest by the Nazis and experience in a work camp. Later he will describe his deportation to Auschwitz. Because this is real literary craft,

it is useless to paraphrase. As Tolstoy said in answer to a question of what *War and Peace* was about, “To answer, I’d have to write the book again from beginning to end.”

To give a sense of his style, I quote from the third part, “From Agony to Life,” when he is in Auschwitz. The chapter is entitled, “The Wild Beast,” and in it Bryks describes a German overseer of the kitchen, Hermann, who takes a young boy, Pinek, to bed nightly and beats a different prisoner with a metal pipe daily. The anecdotal story reflects bare description without analysis.

When he noticed a Jew eating a bit of turnip, he wrote down his number. [...] Exhausted and famished, we eagerly waited for our piece of bread and the moment when we could lie down and rest. But tonight, Hermann barked out, ‘Number 50641, come over here to where I am standing. I want everyone to see!’ [...] None of us knew what Hermann had in store for him. Hermann’s well-fed face smiled ironically. Looking the prisoner in the eye, he asked, ‘Did you eat turnips today?’ In his vast terror, the prisoner was unable to respond. Herman let out a out a murderous scream, ‘You shit bag! If anyone ever gives you a turnip, you’re forbidden to take it!’ He ran into his room and returned with a metal electric pipe. He proceeded to beat the prisoner over the head, shoulders, hands, legs, stomach, and chest with all his might. With the first blows, the victim was silent. But then, as his agony mounted, he let out heart-rending cries. Soon he collapsed onto the stone floor. Hermann bent over and used the pipe to beat him over every inch of his body. The prisoner tossed from side to side. Hermann beat him on the most vulnerable part of his body: the genitalia. (190)

The narrative lacks Borowski’s intentional aestheticization, the creation of literary beauty from misery. Perhaps that’s for the best since at times too much artistic transformation is morally troubling since the reader really should not lose him/herself in the artful writing when the content is so vividly painful. Here Bryks emphasizes clarity, what, when, and how. For example, on the first day of war, he witnesses.

I thought to myself: it won’t be long before the Germans cross the border. If the war is drawn out, I’ll make my way to the Kresy near the Russian border and wait out the fighting there. Walking around this way with such self-assured notions—this was on Freedom Plaza, no less, in the very heart of the city—I suddenly heard a woman crying. I followed the sound and saw a large Jewish family. A Jewish woman approached them from the street and asked, “Who are you?” The crying woman answered, ‘We’re from Wolyń. The Germans bombed our city last night. A bomb dropped on us. We narrowly escaped with just the shirts on our backs. The Germans are bombing the whole country. We barely made it here alive.’ [...] The grandparents, parents, and six children left with her, heading through the nearest covered gateway. I overheard the grandfather say, ‘At eight o’clock last night, the Germans were in Wolyń; and yet here in Łódź, no one knows about the war.’ I didn’t fully grasp the import of his words, because I still believed the deceitful propaganda

the Polish government was spewing over the radio. And as I believed so too did the nation.
(62)

Such raw footage seems appropriate because of the incremental accretions of falsehood and adornment that writers and readers in our day take as truth. With Bryks, one returns to the moment when it happened, what it felt like, what he saw. Personally, I feel as though I found in Bryks a serious teacher of the Holocaust, someone with whom I can trust with the truth.

The book also features two essays at the end, one by Bryks' daughter, Bella Bryks-Klein, who describes the life her father led in NYC, poor, but noble; the family was devoted to the continued survival of Yiddish. The translator of this volume, Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, penned the other essay, which offers essential information about Bryks' life. It should be noted that the English reads smoothly, elegantly. Taub has received much praise for his translations, praise that is eminently deserved.

For the many readers who have never heard of Bryks, I beseech you to get this volume. You are likely to feel as I do, that here is a rare thing, a genuine writer who is ours, writes in Yiddish, although the material belongs to all humanity.