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Book Review: *Jewish Masculinity in the Holocaust: Between Destruction and Construction*

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Jewish Masculinity in the Holocaust: Between Destruction and Construction

Maddy Carey

New York, Bloomsbury, 2017

215 Pages: Price: \$90.00 Hardback

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Maddy Carey, author of *Jewish Masculinity in the Holocaust: Between Destruction and Construction* has written a book accessible for anyone interested in understanding a nuanced aspect of the Holocaust. This book is filled with thoughtful and well-constructed information and analysis. Reading the title, one might think it is an effort to deal with questions concerning the supposed lack of Jewish resistance to the murderous Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945. While present that argument, is not the overriding theme of the book. Instead, the reader will find a book based on a current day interpretation of spoken and written stories and other material from a variety of sources, perpetrators, bystanders, victims and others who experienced, watched or were somehow affected by the events of that historic time.

Carey analyzes Jewish masculinity within the context of Nazi rule in Germany. The first chapter described Jewish masculinity, an essential chapter for non-Jewish readers and for those not familiar with gender studies. Chapters two and three were aligned with distinct periods within the Holocaust. Her delineation of the periods was not based on dates, but conditions caused by German actions across the European continent.¹ Each period was marked by a change in the living conditions of an ordinary Jewish man in Europe beginning with the rise of Hitler to the Chancellery and ending only with Allied victory in Europe and the liberation of the camps. Each chapter presented unique characteristics or descriptions of male behavior based on the climate within the communities, the living conditions, established by the Nazis and the influence of the conditions on Jewish men. Chapter four had a different focus which was affirming the concept of masculinity in the Jewish culture through stories about the influence Jewish fathers had on their children during and after the Holocaust.

Within the introduction Carey informed the readers of the purpose of the book, partially recounted the background of Holocaust-related gender studies, described the research method and addressed problems and concerns of various types related to this research. Her attempt with this book was to examine "...the detail of these (Jewish men) lives including the role of the men in the home and in public, the significance of fatherhood and parenting and multiple and diverse masculinities practiced by Jewish men in this period."² By examining masculinity during the Holocaust from the perspective of Jewish lives affected by the event Carey was conducting research into a neglected area. While the introduction was valuable it was also long. A shorter introduction with less time spent on the arguments for and against this research may have provided the necessary identification of the problem and method without the length. After all the reader needs to focus on the main content not the introductory material.

Chapter one of this work is entitled *Jewish Masculinity in Theory and Practice*. In this chapter Carey provides an overview of theories about masculinity including definitions and different characteristics and how research methods have produced many different ideas about masculinity in general. After laying out a framework of masculinity studies as a subset of gender studies,

¹ Maddy Carey, *Jewish Masculinity in the Holocaust: Between Destruction and Construction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

primarily for the uneducated it seems, she proceeds with a description of Jewish masculinity specifically during the interwar period up to the point deconstruction begins, 1939.

The material in chapter one is essential to understand the complex nature of the German approach beginning in 1939. It is also important for any reader who might not be familiar with the field of study. The combination of the information in the introduction and chapter one created a good foundation to build the rest of the book upon. Chapter one also enables the reader to see the problem from a different perspective and provided an understanding of how Jewish men perceived themselves as men before the beginning of the destruction.

Carey entitled Chapter two, *Masculinity in Crisis: Persecution and Collapse*. Chapter two covers the period referred to by Carey as Destruction. This period extended between the beginning of the war and occupation of non-German lands through the beginning of Ghettoization. While the beginning of the war is tied to a specific date by Historians, Carey does not use a date but considers the pre-war preparation and events as part of the period of destruction of Jewish masculinity in Europe. During this period Carey focused on the continual open humiliation, degradation and public harassment of Jewish men by the Nazi perpetrators their collaborators and, in some instances, ordinary citizens. This period saw Jews, men and women alike, modify their behavior as the changes Hitler and the Nazi Party planted and rooted across Germany began to grow, bloom and deeply influence the lives of normal people in a negative sense. Destruction, as an organism, did not consider the birthplace of the Jew. German-born Jewish men suffered through the emasculation just as much as a Jew born in another place.

The negative environment during Destruction was caused by the continuous outward, violent antisemitism of the German perpetrators. Carey notes this was antithetical to the period before the Nazi rise particularly in Germany. Prior to this time Construction might have been the term used as Jews prospered across Europe and were integrated into society in most instances.³ Destruction was a different experience for each person and much depended on one's station in life. Carey does a remarkable job of collecting those different experiences and relating the collection to the concept of breaking men, like breaking horses, of accepted gendered roles and behaviors. This was not limited to one person at a time but effected an entire segment or group within European society. As the German military and Governments of occupation targeted men for mass round-ups or specific individual attacks or arrests, the Jews response seemingly contributed to the emasculating process. According to Carey the Jewish men determined that resistance would not be effective. As a result, they opted for "...obeying, hiding and running"⁴ as a means of survival. It seemed as if the entire population of Jewish men across Europe chose the same response at the same time. Jewish men may have thought obedience to the German authority was the best means of long-term survival, but it came with consequences according to Carey.

Unmerited obedience did increase their personal survival chances, but it also enhanced the effects of the German techniques and abuse. Carey explains that more and more Jewish men, especially those who chose to obey or hide, were seen by others as feminized, they declined in community status, could not maintain their families social position or in the worst cases their own position of leadership within the family. The combination of German humiliation tactics and the lack of acting to defend themselves crippled the Jewish masculine identity. This continued across the continent into the time of Ghettoization beginning in late 1940 and differed for nearly every Jewish community. Basic humiliation and bullying would occur in one town while in another the men had moved past the first stages and faced mass round-ups, forced labor and mass executions. Carey points out that men were in different places, with different experiences occurring at the same time so there was no clear Jewish masculine identity across the Nazi occupied territories.

Chapter three describes how Ghetto life changed Jewish men by remasculinizing them. This was the Enclosure and Stabilization period. During Ghetto confinement Jewish life existed in a totally Jewish community. The Jews were segregated from the German or Aryan communities and that of other European cities in which most had assimilated. They were forced into small spaces

³ Ibid., 49.

⁴ Ibid., 54.

for the size of the population without adequate housing, food, water or any other resource. Many times, they were joined by Jews from other cities and even other countries which exacerbated the existing problems. During this period Carey argues, Jewish men began to regain their masculinity. She presents the case this was because of the reestablishment of a form of normalcy and community. She even argues, while Ghetto life was exceptionally difficult, it had many benefits regarding the reappearance of masculine attributes because the entire community was Jewish and understood the Jewish culture and traditions. They were not interspersed within a Gentile national culture and community. Jews were living with other Jews and governing their daily lives through Jewish customs, as much as possible.

During Stabilization the Jewish men faced much less public bullying or harassment which allowed them to individually and collectively regain the position or honor once held within Jewish circles. Carey does not imply abuse and killing no longer existed, only that the frequency of the lesser forms of public humiliation, for example, was less. Masculinity and masculine roles and actions returned as the public humiliation subsided and a new normal of family life, for those with families, and community life began to reappear. Carey states that many Jews saw this as the end state of Nazi aggression against the Jews. Some Jews even believed nothing worse would happen and normal cycles of life and death would continue in the Ghettos until the war ended. History informs us, that mindset was short sighted and wrong. As Ghetto life was normalized men took on many roles or reassumed those masculine roles they may have laid down at one point. Therefore, Carey labels this period as enclosure and stability.

One shortcoming of the book is the lack of discussion concerning the worst part of the Holocaust. Carey does not describe the Nazi goal of complete elimination of the Jews in Europe. I assume this is due to Execution being the ultimate emasculation, one impossible to recover from. As a reader though, one expects to move from the pseudo-stability of Ghettoization into the period historically labeled as the Final Solution. Carey did not approach it this way and instead moves into a discussion of filial bonds. The lack of discussion of attempted total elimination misses an important part of the narrative. Also, the move into the discussion of the importance of fathers in family life seemed almost disconnected from the remainder of the book even though the topic is important and almost uplifting considering the topic and context of Carey's writing.

The last chapter describes the personal relationship between a father and his children through the eyes of many such relationships. The nature of the father child relationship and how masculinity influences the relationship seems hard to describe within one family let alone an entire population. While Carey attempts to do justice to the concept she leaves important aspects uncovered or, perhaps better stated, under the covers of the years in between then and now and the resulting fog of the past. She simply does not give enough time to one of the most important relationships within the human community. This does not mean that her analysis is incorrect or shortsighted. Instead it is only enough to keep the reader wanting to read more. To appreciate the relationships, to identify with the people, to grieve for the loss of so many just when the need was so great, and to grasp the pain associated with missing that masculine influence as one continues to live. This chapter really forces the reader to contemplate one's relationship with their father or one's children. In doing so, Carey has moved past a discussion of the horror and desolation felt by reading about the Crime of Crimes, the complete destruction of so many men, women and children, to a place of reflection and perchance of hope. The hope that future generations will not destroy each other, will not attempt to eradicate the masculinity or femininity or any other aspect of a group. Instead there is hope that thinking about personal bonds of family will cause us to love one another more.