

9-4-2020

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Recommended Citation

Snow, James J. (2020) "Book Review: *Sources of Holocaust Insight*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2: 173-175.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.14.2.1777>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol14/iss2/12>

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Book Review: *Sources of Holocaust Insight*

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Sources of Holocaust Insight

John K. Roth

Eugene, Cascade Books, 2020

304 Pages; Price: \$35.00 Paperback

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Scholars, students, and practitioners who have engaged with the works of John K. Roth over the years will, at first blush, find *Sources of Holocaust Insight* to seemingly take a different direction. It is a deeply personal reflection on over fifty years of Holocaust Studies focusing on the scholars, witnesses, survivors, friends, and others who have been such rich resources of Holocaust insight. Although distinctly different in some ways from his earlier books, this latest book continues to explore the big questions that endure from the recognition that, as he writes in the Epilogue, "The Holocaust signifies immense failure—ethical, religious, political."¹ This work, then, is equally as important as any of his previous works.

In the Prologue, "Acts of Recognition," Roth writes that he "revisits [his] sources of Holocaust insight . . . not only to pay tribute to them but also to refocus the insight."² The latter purpose is especially important and serves to make the book far richer than just an intellectual memoir of someone for whom the Holocaust has served as a compass for over fifty years. Also clear in the Prologue is his understanding of what he means by "insight." Expanding on the early 20th century philosopher Josiah Royce's understanding of insight, Roth makes two important claims: insight does not occur in solitude. "They [insights] require interpersonal exchanges that challenge and correct, augment and amplify. . . . [Moreover], "[s]eeking and finding insight are ongoing actions. . . [t]o have insight is to recognize that learning is never finished, [and] that my grasp of things is fallible and incomplete. . . ."³

In the space of a review it is not possible or even desirable to discuss all the people Roth engages in the text. He devotes chapters to Richard Rubenstein, Elie Wiesel, Franklin Littell, Raul Hilberg, Sarah Kofman and Charlotte Delbo, Philip Hallie and Albert Camus, Primo Levi, and Jean Amery. He also discusses lesser known friends and colleagues who have been equally important sources of insight. I will confine my remarks to a few of the writers, artists, and survivors he engages, followed by some more general remarks about the book as a whole.

Although Roth self-identifies as a Christian, he takes to heart Richard Rubenstein's claim that Christianity is to be indicted in the Holocaust. Roth writes: "Significantly, the Holocaust did not occur until the mid-twentieth century, but conditions necessary, but not sufficient, to produce it were formed centuries before. Decisive in that process was Christian anti-Judaism and its demonization of the Jew."⁴ And it was Rubenstein's insight that the New Testament defamed the Jews in unprecedented ways. Franklin Littell's work also served to unsettle Roth by emphasizing the close connections between Christianity and the Holocaust. While Roth and Rubenstein certainly have areas of disagreement, for example, Roth is more sanguine than Rubenstein about how deeply rooted *jihad* is in Islamic history and tradition, one important insight that Roth finds in Rubenstein's writings is the important role religion played in the Holocaust and the role it has played in other genocides.

¹ John K. Roth, *Sources of Holocaust Insight* (Eugene, Oregon, 2020), 258.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

Readers will not be surprised to learn that one of the greatest sources of Holocaust insight for Roth are the writings of Elie Wiesel. He says of his first encounter with Wiesel's *Night*: "I became a philosopher tripped up by Holocaust history. . . . Not until I read Wiesel, however, did my life take the Holocaust turn that changed me personally and professionally forever."⁵ Speaking at Wiesel's funeral, his son, Elisha, said of his father that he did not question God's existence, but rather God's decisions. Inspired by Wiesel's ongoing dialogue (sometimes one-sided) with God, Roth found license for his "ongoing quarrel with God, Jesus, and Christianity."⁶

Those familiar with the scholarship of Raul Hilberg, especially *The Destruction of European Jews*, will find Roth's chapter devoted to Hilberg one of, if not the most, illuminative. Hilberg was trained as a political scientist and taught in the Department of Political Science at the University of Vermont for many years. The first edition of *The Destruction of European Jews*, published in 1961 in three volumes, was long-regarded as the definitive history of the Holocaust. What Roth is able to glean from Hilberg's writings are what he calls "Hilberg's moral insights." Key for Roth's reading of Hilberg is his focus on perpetrators and the realization that perpetrators and bystanders over and over were ordinary people and this points to the failure of ethics, a theme explicitly addressed in an earlier work of Roth's.⁷ A key insight gleaned from Hilberg is that being driven by melancholy and moral anger, Hilberg was determined to tell it to the world, and this is what Roth recognizes as Hilberg's "most crucial imperative."⁸

I would be remiss not to review the discussion Roth devotes to witnesses, poets, and artists who have been significant sources of Holocaust insight. These sources are often not given the credit they so richly deserve by philosophers, historians, political scientists, and other academic scholars who devote themselves to the study of the Holocaust and other genocides. Seemingly by accident, Roth discovered the poetry of Gertrud Kolmar, a German Jew who lived in Berlin and likely died at Auschwitz. In Kolmar's collection of poems, entitled *Dark Soliloquy*, she ends the poem, "The Woman Poet," with this line: "You hear me speak. But do you hear me feel?"⁹ I do not know of a philosopher and Holocaust scholar who better hears the words and feelings of the artist. Whether it be the paintings of Samuel Bak or the writings of Charlotte Delbo, Roth does not shy from sources which resist closure. Of Delbo he writes: "she taught me that no matter how long and well I studied the Holocaust, I could never close the knowledge gaps that reflected differences between *before* and *after*, *then* and *now*, *there* and *here*."¹⁰

One of the most chilling Holocaust insights is owed to the Italian chemist, Primo Levi. Especially unsettling is Levi's discussion of the "grey zone," Levi's term for the moral space occupied by many of his fellow prisoners at Auschwitz. The most extreme case of the grey zone in the camps, especially Auschwitz, were members of the Sonderkommando, Jewish prisoners who were given certain privileges in the camps in return for carrying out some of the more gruesome tasks such as removing things of value such as gold teeth from gassed corpses and then transporting them to the crematoria. The Sonderkommandos were faced with "choiceless choices" similar to the choiceless choices faced by the Judenrat in the ghettos. The moral "ambiguities and compromises" that define the grey zone meant that "Levi saw the grey-zone behavior could not be neatly analyzed in terms of right and wrong as least not as most traditions of philosophical ethics might try to do."¹¹

For Roth, the Holocaust signals the tremendous failures of ethics and religion, especially Christianity and calls on us to not just acknowledge but confront those failures as well. But, and as he writes in the Epilogue, we must "refuse to let that fact be the last judgment."¹²

⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁷ John K. Roth, *The Failures of Ethics: Confronting the Holocaust, Genocide, and Other Mass Atrocities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁸ Roth, *Sources of Holocaust Insight*, 102.

⁹ Gertrud Kolmar, *Dark Soliloquy: The Selected Poems of Gertrud Kolmar*, trans. Henry A. Smith (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).

¹⁰ Roth, *Sources of Holocaust Insight*, 156.

¹¹ Ibid., 214.

¹² Ibid., 258.

Many students and scholars of the Holocaust would be quick to cite the scholarship of John Roth as an important source of Holocaust insight, and this latest book might well provide additional insights, especially his warning that we dare not take anything good for granted.