

Literature On The Holocaust

The depiction of the events of the Holocaust through fiction, drama and poetry. Some literature about the Holocaust is written as historical fiction that closely follows actual events, adding only imaginary dialogue that is consistent with those events. Other writing is much more removed from the actual course of events, and uses allegory and other a-historical literary devices to get its point across.

Both Jews and non-Jews have written about aspects of the Holocaust in the French language, especially about the camps. Charlotte Delbo and Jorge Semprun are among the best known non-Jews who have written in this vein. The works of Elie Wiesel are probably the best known pieces of Holocaust literature written in French by a Jewish writer. His first publication, actually written in Yiddish and published in French in 1958, was *La Nuit* (published in English in 1964 as *Night*). This novel, which has since been translated into many additional languages, is almost autobiographical. Wiesel's later works transcend the real-life Holocaust experience and depict a poetic universe rooted in Jewish tradition. Another important French Jewish author is Anna Langfus who, in *The Whole Land Brimstone* (published in English in 1962), is extremely realistic in her depiction of the concentration camp universe. One of the most significant allegorical works about the Holocaust, *The Last of the Just* (published in English in 1961), was written by Andre Schwarz-Bart. Using the Jewish folk tradition concerning the role of 36 righteous people in maintaining the world, he explores the significance of the sanctification of God's name. Other important French Jewish writers who began publishing about the Holocaust in the first three decades after the war include Romain Gary, Jean-Francois Steiner, and Henri Raczymov. In the last decade of the twentieth century several new authors published fiction in French about the Holocaust, including Johan Bourret, Jean Malaquais, Fanny Levy and Yael Hassan.

Through the end of the 1980s, most German fiction writers chose to avoid Holocaust themes. Prior to the 1980s, the best known author to have dealt with the Nazi regime (although not directly with the Holocaust) was probably

Gunther Grass. Somewhat less known was Jacob Lind, who dealt more directly with Jewish themes in his writing. Until the 1970s those Germans who wrote about the Nazi period generally portrayed both perpetrators and victims in a two-dimensional fashion. This rather black and white presentation of events is evident in Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (published in English in 1964). Hochhuth's work, a damning fictional presentation of the moral failure of Pope Pius XII to help the Jews, incited much discussion when it first came out. In Peter Weiss's drama, *The Investigation* (published in English in 1964), the theme raised about the personal responsibility of the perpetrators is heavy, but does not really probe the depths of Nazi criminality. In the 1990s many literary works were published in German about the Holocaust, both original German works and translations into German. Some like *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink reached a wide audience, and were made into films. German language poets have also addressed the Holocaust. One of the most powerful poems ever written about the murder of the Jews is Paul Celan's *Todesfuge*, or *Death Fugue*, with its haunting refrain: "death is the master in Germany."

It is not surprising that the Holocaust is the main theme or a secondary theme in hundreds of works of literature in Hebrew. Some of Israel's most highly regarded and best-selling authors have written about the Holocaust, including Dan Ben Amotz, David Grossman, Haim Guri, Savyon Liebrecht, Aharon Meged, Uri Orlev, Amos Oz, and Dan Pagis. Others, such as Yehiel Dinur (known as Ka-Tzetnik) and Aharon Appelfeld, are famous specifically for their Holocaust writings. In addition, many Hebrew works about the Holocaust have been translated into other languages. The Holocaust has also made its imprint on the Hebrew drama. Hebrew playwrights such as Motti Lerner and Yehoshua Sobol have addressed controversial issues, such as collaboration with the Nazis and the existence of theatres in the ghettos.

Hebrew poetry on the Holocaust has been created by three generations of poets. The first generation---the poets of the 1940s---was far removed from the scene of the crime. These poets did not write firsthand; they wrote on the basis of what they sensed of the dread of the Holocaust. The second generation witnessed the creation of the state of Israel. Most of these poets

abandoned the direct approach of the first generation of Hebrew Holocaust poets, and instead searched for indirect means of expressing the horror. Poets like Abba Kovner, Dan Pagis, Itamar Yazo-Kest, and Yaakov Besser, who personally experienced World War II in their early childhood or youth, express both the personal and the national trauma of the Holocaust. The third generation of Hebrew poets to write about the Holocaust consists of children of Holocaust survivors.

In Poland, there was a wave of writing about the Holocaust immediately after the war, but during the Stalinist period that lasted until 1956, these writers were essentially silenced. After a wave of Polish Antisemitism in the late 1960s, Polish literature devoted greater attention to the subject of Jewish-Polish relations during the Holocaust. The major figure that has preoccupied Polish Holocaust literature is that of Janusz Korczak. Since the fall of the Communist regime, many works of fiction and poetry have been published. Among the most heart-wrenching works to appear in Polish in the last decade (also translated into English and Hebrew) are those of Ida Fink. Her short stories discuss the terrible choices, or lack thereof, which Jews faced during the Nazi period. In works written in Polish, as well as in Yiddish and occasionally in Hebrew, the borderline between literature and historical documentation is often blurred, especially when those works were created during or immediately after the war. The Polish writings of Tadeusz Borowski, such as *This Way to the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen* (published in English in 1967), are especially noteworthy.

The amount of literature on the Holocaust that has appeared in English (both as original works and in translation) is immense. It reflects the tremendous surge of interest that began in the United States in the last three decades of the twentieth century. As a group, Americans have confronted the Holocaust through the eyes of others, with only immigrant survivors and some soldiers having had direct contact with its horror. The first American encounter with the Holocaust can be found in the writings of returning American soldiers. The horror of their encounter so exceeded the grasp of the imagination that the language that tried to contain it was often stretched to its limits. This can be seen in the works of John Hersey (*The Wall*, 1950), Bernard Malamud (*The*

Assistant, 1957), and Lewis Wallant (*The Pawnbroker*, 1961). In the two decades following the Eichmann Trial, a kind of "fascination with Nazism" led to the flourishing of an American literature on the Holocaust. Around this time, but more so from the mid-1970s onward, the voices of the survivors began to be heard. Elie Wiesel, whose works were translated into English, has arguably made the greatest impact on the American reading public. Primo Levi's writings have also been widely read. In addition, best-selling writers, Jews and non-Jews, have used the Holocaust or the Nazi camps as a theme in their works. Among them are Saul Bellow (*Mr. Sammler's Planet*, 1972), William Styron (*Sophie's Choice*, 1979), Cynthia Ozik (*The Shawl*, 1989), Louis Begley (*The Man Who Was Late*, 1993), Pat Conroy (*Beach Music*, 1996), and Belva Plain (*Legacy of Silence*, 1998). In the last decade of the twentieth century the impact of Holocaust literature has been so great that its study has become a staple course at many universities and colleges in the United States.

The flourishing of modern Yiddish literature was halted by the Holocaust. Nevertheless, Yiddish literature continued to be written in the ghettos and camps, and it played an important public role in providing spiritual sustenance to the ghetto population. Little is known about the Yiddish literature created in the extermination camps, as it was hard to find a hiding place for literary works in the camps, and even those authors who survived came back empty-handed. Still, a few of the works created in the camps were saved, such as Zalman Gradowski's *In Harts fun Gehenem* (*In the Heart of Hell*). The texts of songs sung in Chelmno, Treblinka, Auschwitz, and other extermination camps were published by Nahum Blumenthal.

Literature and poetry on the Holocaust have appeared in many other languages, as well, both as original creations and in translation. There is a significant body of books in Czech, Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, Russian and Serbo-Croatian. Books have also appeared in most of the other European languages, including Finnish, Ladino and Greek.