

challenges. Yet, ironically, his deafness and ability to adapt enabled him to survive: “I don’t practice Judaism anymore. Too many things have happened in my life that made me question the existence of God. . . . My fate was to be deaf, but being deaf saved my life. If I would have been hearing, I would not have survived the war. I would have been sent to Auschwitz, along with the other members of my family. Instead, I was sent to Budapest where, with luck and determination, I stayed alive” (p. 181).

Harry Dunai’s odyssey ranks among the best of recently published survivor accounts. His circumstances provide a unique perspective for the general reader as well as for the specialist in Holocaust studies. However, at least one of his assertions, presumably supported by his daughter, who prepared the endnotes, must be approached with caution. Dunai states categorically that Rudolf Kasztner, a Jewish leader from Transylvania who attempted to save Jews by negotiating with Adolf Eichmann, was a “traitor” (p. 43). Recent research shows that these Nazi-Jewish negotiations were more complicated and open to more nuanced interpretation than Dunai would have us believe.<sup>3</sup> In addition, at least one map of the Czechoslovak and Hungarian areas in which Harry lived would have been useful, especially for high-school students, for whom the book is also suitable.

Individual accounts that conjure up important events are essential, especially for the study of the Holocaust. They are the stuff of history, but only part of the entire tapestry of history per se. Both of these books are necessary for our understanding of the story of deaf people during the Holocaust; they are an excellent starting point for further research and reflection.

## Notes

1. Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
2. Horst Biesold, *Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1999).
3. Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

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## ***Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, Aaron Gillette (London: Routledge, 2002), 247 pp., \$80.00.**

Neither racism nor anti-Semitism had been part of Italian Fascism’s formative principles and ideology. There were prominent Jewish fascists and antifascists, and membership in either camp had less to do with Judaism than other attributes such as class, region, generation, and ideological orientation. If anything, the fascist regime was

philo-Semitic for the first fifteen years of its twenty-year reign, before turning abruptly toward anti-Semitism. Mussolini had ridiculed Nazi racial bombast before Hitler came to power, and continued to do so until 1936, while fascist Italy became a celebrated refuge or place for “extended visits” by prominent German Jews. George Mosse recalls arriving in Rome during this period as a youngster with his family, and finding at the hotel a bouquet of flowers sent to his mother by none other than Mussolini. To be sure, Mosse’s father was an influential publishing magnate, not merely a Jew, but no comparable gesture had ever been made by Hitler.

It would be wrong to reduce Italy’s turn toward racism simply to a necessary accommodation to Germany, once Mussolini decided on the alliance with Hitler. By the mid-1930s, the fascist regime had entered a serious legitimation crisis. Growing social unrest followed a decline in living conditions occasioned by the Depression as well as the failure of syndical reform and corporatist initiatives. The lack of movement and the bureaucratic involution of the regime were openly criticized by a broad range of actors. Responding to this worsening situation, Mussolini called for the creation of a new, heroic *uomo fascista* and launched a campaign against the “bourgeois spirit.” He delivered what he called “three punches to the belly of the bourgeoisie”: the “anti-Lei” campaign (against the formal second-person pronoun, identified as “antipopular”), and two clearly proto-Nazi measures, introducing the so-called *passo romano* marching step (an Italian version of the infamous goose step), and racial legislation against the Jews, now denounced as incarnations of the bourgeois spirit. Thus the turn toward racism—formalized by the “Manifesto of Racial Scientists” in 1938, a new racial office in the Ministry of Popular Culture, and racial legislation and propaganda—may be understood also as a radical extension of the “antibourgeois” campaign, a strategy to jump-start a regime that had run out of gas.

*Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* seeks to reconstitute the ideological climate of this period, paying close attention to competing racial theories elaborated by separate, mutually suspicious, and altogether hostile “Nordic” and “Mediterranean” camps. The former supported a Nazi-derived biological determinism and identified the Italians as “Aryans.” The Mediterraneanists ridiculed both Aryan identity (to them Aryans were a disparate linguistic group, not a race) and the historical importance of Germanic “barbarians,” insisting on the centrality of the Mediterranean, the Greco-Roman inheritance, *latinità*, and the primacy of spirit over biology. Aaron Gillette displays an impressive command of the holdings of the massive Archivio Centrale dello Stato, as well as mastery of a large body of racist literature directly produced or sponsored by the regime. His account is nuanced, rich in detail, and attentive to shifts in the relative weight between Nordicists and Mediterraneanists. To two previously published journal essays on Italian racism, he has added what might well stand as a definitive monograph.

Gillette carefully demonstrates that internal debates on racial policy were determined by political exigencies and thoroughly dependent on Mussolini’s

personal mediation. In fact, on this Gillette is so convincing that one wonders whether his protracted hermeneutic effort was necessary, especially since racial propaganda was largely unread by an indifferent, if not hostile, public that was never effectively mobilized around racial themes. To the general public indifference one might add the Church's hostility to the state's mimetic racism, especially that of the Nordacist biological genre, which violated Catholic universalism and spirituality; the opposition of leading Fascists such as Italo Balbo, Luigi Federzoni, Emilio De Bono, and Giacomo Acerbo, who argued that Nordic racism contradicted fascist principles and who voted against racial legislation in the Fascist Grand Council; and, of course, the incredible cynicism of Mussolini, who privately lambasted the concept of racial purity, ridiculed the Racial Manifesto ("a conscientious German essay translated into bad Italian"), and conceded "a little Jewish blood, in the end, never hurt anyone." Although there were a few true believers, such as the thoroughly malevolent philo-Nazi Giovanni Preziosi, many of the Italian racists were motivated by rank opportunism: the prospect of prize academic appointments, high-status political appointments, foreign travel, and, of course, power and influence. Guido Landra, for example, who authored the Racial Manifesto and headed the racial office, began as a Mediterraneanist with little hostility toward Jews, but quickly transformed himself into a virulent antisemitic Nordacist in 1938 when Mussolini offered him leadership opportunities. Two years later, when Mussolini sought to replace Nordicism with Mediterraneanism, Landra was undone, blaming his demise not on Il Duce's change of heart but on "Jews and anti-racists."

The two competing strands of Italian racism largely canceled each other out and prevented the development of a unified position. Moreover, Nordacist and Mediterranean articulations touched on external relations with Germany as well. Nazi authorities took offense at the Mediterraneanist denigration of uncultured northern "barbarians," while Mediterraneanists (and Mussolini as well) objected to the subordinate placement of Italians in the Nazi racial hierarchy, owing to the fact that their blood allegedly had been crossed with Africans. Curiously, Gillette offers no compelling explanation why Mussolini initially opted for the Nordacist position when the decision to play the race card was made in 1938. The decision evoked a rebuke from Pope Pius XI, who publicly accused Mussolini of imitating the Germans and denying Italy's Roman heritage. At the same time, the same decision elicited no manifest support from public opinion (according to secret police reports). Apparently many ordinary Italians were incredulous at the idea that they were "Aryans." Certainly the nature and intensity of Italy's relationship with Germany were major factors in this and later shifts in racist policy.

By autumn 1939, when Hitler's aggression led to an improvised pact with the Soviet Union and the outbreak of war, Mussolini's tentative estrangement from Germany precipitated a renewed support for the Mediterraneanists. By summer 1942, when Italy clearly was losing the war and relying heavily on German backing,

Mediterraneanists in turn gave way to Mussolini's preference for Julius Evola's so-called spiritual Nordicism, which undercut *latinità* yet also rejected biological determinism. Mussolini, who by that time had lost any room for further improvisation, would fall from power a year later.

As the great historian Renzo De Felice noted, by the mid-1930s Italy had become a personal dictatorship; Fascism, as a distinctive organizing principle, ideology, or movement, had given way to Ducism. Accordingly, there were no autonomous "fascist" articulations of policy or ideas independent of Mussolini's will, or rather, caprice. In this regard, it might have been more accurate to say that various racial ideas were strategically cultivated and deployed by Mussolini to confront changing exigencies. And these were "fascist" only in a nominal sense.

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***The Terror of Our Days: Four American Poets Respond to the Holocaust*, Harriet L. Parmet (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2001), 268 pp., \$43.50.**

To identify the Holocaust as an incident of history—as merely an event in someone else's past—is to dismantle its significance in favor of peace of mind. In her new book, *The Terror of Our Days*, Harriet Parmet questions whether the Holocaust can be claimed as a singly "psychological," "political," or "theological phenomenon" (p. 17). In fact, the universal application of terms once associated with the Holocaust (i.e., using particular suffering as a metaphor) will lead, as Yehuda Bauer suggests, to its "de-Judaization" (p. 18). The risk, of course, involves trivializing events and reducing them to parable. As difficult as communication must be for those whose immediate history contains Holocaust experiences, there are others whose lives have been shaped by the Holocaust yet who have had no direct experience of suffering or persecution. Parmet's book identifies four individuals—Sylvia Plath, William Heyen, Gerald Stern, and Jerome Rothenberg—who, because of their distance from the Holocaust, have been "denied a survivor's guilt," but for whom the Holocaust remained an inspiration to the soul and a muse for the writing spirit (p. 20).

Existing as both "original creation and as vital cultural transmission," writings about the Holocaust possess tremendous significance and hold great responsibility as means of communication (p. 19). Where words fail to describe an illogical event, where inability to articulate is the grandest battle, such writing is raised to even greater station.

In an extensive introduction to her text, Parmet identifies several schools of critical thought regarding Holocaust literature. The author acknowledges the key figures and effectively summarizes their modes of thought. After citing Theodor Adorno's oft-quoted claim that writing poetry after Auschwitz is "barbaric," Parmet skillfully discusses the literature of the absurd, a genre that responds "precisely to the