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Abstract

Review of Edna Aizenberg. On the Edge of the Holocaust: The Shoah in Latin America Literature and Culture. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis UP, 2016.

Keywords

Edna Aizenberg, On the Edge of the Holocaust: The Shoah in Latin America Literature and Culture

Edna Aizenberg. *On the Edge of the Holocaust: The Shoah in Latin America Literature and Culture*. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis UP, 2016. ix + 182 pp.

The mission of Edna Aizenberg's *On the Edge of the Holocaust: The Shoah in Latin America Literature and Culture* is clear from the beginning: to make things right. By that, she means to study and research how Latin American intellectuals thought and wrote about the Holocaust while it was happening. By doing this, she also debunks the myth that only Nazis escaped to South America and, therefore, those countries were sympathizers to the Hitlerian cause. While some governments of Latin America may have sided with fascist ideology, the author wants to prove that several well-known producers of culture of the time were horrified by the persecution of Jews in Europe. Aizenberg's two-pronged approach proves smart, as she dissects specific works of art in order to locate precise evidence in support of her hypothesis. She also spent considerable time and effort in libraries and archives all over the world to support her ideas with factual data from indispensable documents like letters and passports.

The book is divided into five chapters, each of which is dedicated to five different intellectuals. The first is world-renowned Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. Aizenberg focuses on his short story "Deutsches Requiem" in order to begin exploring Borges' anti-fascist ideas and to think "about philosophy as a *political act* and politics as a *philosophical act*" (7). That this short story had not been critically studied until Aizenberg's lucid text is poignant evidence of literary critics' reticence to allow for the possibility of Borges as both anti-Nazi and a mourner of German culture at the time of the Shoah.

The next chapter is devoted to *la grande dame* of Brazilian letters, Clarice Lispector. Her Jewish family background and her witnessing of the atrocities of war as the wife of a Brazilian consul in Europe provide context for her determination to put the horror on paper; Lispector's personal letters to family and friends are a wonderful insight into her thoughts in this regard. Yet Lispector's writing is anything but straightforward, and Aizenberg demonstrates her skills of literary analysis with finesse, particularly when discussing the short story "Berne: Instante Alpino" (*An Alpine Moment*) and the novel *The Besieged City*. The many narrative fragments and absences in Lispector's novel are conduit to Aizenberg's claim: readers must look beyond the obvious and connect the dots between Lispector's personal and subjective voice on the one hand, and her more distanced, objective observations on the other hand. It is the fusion of these two perspectives that reveal deeper connections between Lispector's horrified writings about the Nazi regime in a novel set in a fictional suburb of 1920s Brazil.

The third chapter centers on Alberto Gerchunoff, a familiar character to Aizenberg, who has written about him in other articles and books. This Jewish Ukrainian-Argentine writer and journalist is considered a pioneer in Jewish Latin

American cultural production with the publishing of his iconic 1910 *The Jewish Gauchos*. Aizenberg explains the differences between the 1910 and 1936 editions of this text, then astutely leads us to the changes Gerchunoff experienced when news of the Shoah started making its way to South America. It is then when Gerchunoff feels the commanding need to write articles and essays denouncing the horrors and perils of the European fascist regimes. Although Gerchunoff never published his manuscript *The Star of David*, a compilation of the many articles he published between 1938 and 1946, Aizenberg brings this archival material into her study to reveal a new, “less familiar Gerchunoff, still partly hidden in the archives” (56). This transition from a representative of hope in the centennial celebration of Argentina (hence, the publication of *The Jewish Gauchos* in 1910) to a distraught defender of liberal values (writing articles in contemporary newspapers) is persuasively documented in this third chapter. Aizenberg also includes a 1941 illustration and a 1947 photograph of Gerchunoff at the beginning of the chapter, which serve as visual representations of the transformation the Holocaust imposed on public intellectuals, Jewish exiles, and Jewish Latin Americans at the time. These images make visible the weight born by those determined to fight the Holocaust’s reach.

The fourth chapter is devoted to João Guimarães Rosa, one of Brazil’s most iconic writers and a diplomat who, along with his wife Aracy, helped numerous Jews escape from the Third Reich in Hamburg, Germany. This experience left a profound mark on Guimarães Rosa, and Aizenberg uses letters, an interview, and his wife’s induction into the Department of Righteous among the Nations at Yad Vashem (the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority in Israel) to show us the development of both Guimarães Rosa’s novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*) and his *estórias* (stories in the unpublished “War Diary”). Linguistically gifted, Guimarães Rosa tried to stand against the language of the Third Reich, “saving languages while saving lives” (110), in an effort to give testimony to the tragedy he witnessed. As neither Portuguese nor any of the other Western languages he knew seemed enough to combat the human horror, Guimarães Rosa felt the need to invent words, which are now and forever printed in history.

The final chapter features Gabriela Mistral, winner of the Chilean Nobel Prize in Literature. This diplomat, educator, and poet tried, like Guimarães Rosa, to help rescue Jews from Europe, sometimes involving her own government or using contacts in other Latin American countries. Again, Aizenberg digs through archives and libraries to find letters written by Mistral that show the level of despair when dealing with fascism in both Europe and her own country. The three texts analyzed are the poems “To the Hebrew People” and “Poem of the Hebrews” and the essay “Message on the Jews.” Aizenberg’s analyses are precise and compelling, detailing sources and her own thoughts. Unlike Lispector, Mistral does not leave

fragments or absences, but uses plain language and clearly advocates for peace as an opponent of irrational persecution and carnage (as an example, the story of Elly León is especially heart-wrenching, as it paints a realistic face that illustrates the numbers of destroyed lives).

Like Mistral, Aizenberg believes that “those who had survived on the edge of the Holocaust . . . were still dying day by day, hurting from the scars that remained” (152). Aizenberg’s goals of filling a void in the studies of the Shoah and Latin America, as well as redeeming the work of several important Latin American intellectuals during and after the Holocaust, are definitely achieved in this book. These writers may have lived on the edge of the Holocaust, but their commitment was centered within it.

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