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Book review

Steir-Livny, Liat (2017). *Is It OK to Laugh about It? Holocaust Humour, Satire and Parody in Israeli Culture*. London, Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell Publishers. 207 pp.

The book discusses the phenomenon of Holocaust humour in Israel in comparison to other countries. For many years, Israeli culture recoiled from dealing with the Holocaust from a humorous or satirical perspective. A humorous approach has been seen as a threat to the sanctity of its memory, a dangerous process that normalises Nazism and Hitler. Official agents of Holocaust memory continue following this approach, but from the 1990s onwards, an alternative, unofficial path of commemoration has been taking shape.

The book may be of interest for humour scholars from different disciplines as it contains many analytical angles and involves a rich collection of films, TV shows, books, poetry, songs, and skits based on Holocaust humour, satire, and parody, which is valuable by itself. For those who are interested in the nature and theory of humour, the book presents a comprehensive analysis of humorous ambiguity. Humour researchers and practitioners often form two opposed wings: those who stress the positive functions of humour, and those who underline the negative ones. The idea to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive humour styles (Kirsh & Kuiper 2003; Martin et al. 2003) presents a partial compromise, but it is still far from catching the whole complex reality. Steir-Livny explains through many examples the ambiguous nature of humour, which cannot be defined as just good or bad, adaptive or maladaptive. Thus, in relation to the trauma, Holocaust humour presents "working out" and "working through" mechanisms at the same time.

The book is well-structured, which helps the reader to follow the main ideas in a series of examples. The main theses are reviewed in the Introduction and the Conclusions, and at the end the chapters.

Steir-Livny discusses Holocaust humour, satire, and parody from different perspectives: as mocking the serious acting out of the Holocaust; as a defence mechanism allowing people to maintain some distance from the trauma; as a form of political and social protest; as a way to discuss ethnic issues in Israel, and others.

The book includes two parts. In the first part, entitled "Introduction", Steir-Livny offers the theoretical framework of her research. She examines different definitions of Jewish and Israeli humour. Ziv (1998) defined Jewish humour as humour created by Jews for Jews, which reflects particular aspects of Jewish life: in particular, the sense of continuous physical danger. He proposes three major characteristics of Jewish humour: making fun of the tragic reality (humour as a defence mechanism); the focus of the uniqueness and the feeling of superiority of the Jewish people; and self-deprecation. The latter has been interpreted in different ways by scholars. On the one hand, comedy and tragedy in Jewish humour are very closely connected, reflecting the power of the powerless who always need to adjust themselves. On the other hand, Jewish humour historically mocked "old Jews", i.e. traditional, religious ones, from whom the emancipated secular Jews tried to separate themselves. In this view, humour does not function as self-deprecating indeed. On the contrary, some authors regard Jewish humour

as a myth and relate the phenomenon not to the Jewish people themselves, but to specific socioeconomic factors.

Steir-Livny highlights similarities and differences between Jewish and Israeli humour. Scholars argue that the traditional self-ironical Jewish humour disappeared in Israel as far as Jews went from being a minority to a majority. The new conditions resulted in humour changes. Thus, Ziv (1998) claims that the major characteristic of Israeli humour is not self-deprecation, but *hutzpa*: cheekiness, aggressiveness, and a satirical tone. Israeli humour can also mock Jews, but these are other Jews, the ones who belong to another political, economic, or ethnic group. The concept of a threatening environment is still there, but its image has changed so as to involve Arabs.

Steir-Livny explores the way Holocaust humour has changed from an absolute taboo to an open discussion in popular culture in the western world. From the 1990s Holocaust-related humour is circulated more and more freely. Lipman (1993) and other scholars later on analysed humour and laughter during the Holocaust, including humour in ghettos and camps, which is regarded as a subversive force, as the weapon of helpless people. Filmmakers also began to include humoristic perspectives while presenting the story of the Holocaust: this is the case of films such as “Life is Beautiful”, “Train of Life”, “Dead Snow”, “Iron Sky”. Steir-Livny analyses “The Last Laugh”, a documentary film which overviews the ways Holocaust humour is presented in the western culture. Second generation survivors used to joke about the Holocaust among themselves, but after the 1990s they began to be more open about it. For instance, Steir-Livny turns to Lipkin and Waldoks, both second generation Holocaust survivors, who in 1999 performed a stand-up show mainly focused on the Holocaust. They claimed that second generation survivors used to be ashamed for their Holocaust humour which they actually used a lot. Thus, they were among the first ones to talk about it openly.

Even in Germany people seemed to be ready to perceive the Holocaust in a humorous manner by the 1990s, which is manifested in a number of stand-up comedies, TV shows, and films. Ashkenazi (2011) described two types of Holocaust humour in contemporary Germany: grotesque imitations of Nazis, and sophisticated Holocaust satire which functions like a warning for the future. The shared feature of the two is the outer perspective, where Nazism is perceived as a far, foreign phenomenon, that other people are responsible for. Ashkenazi argues that mocking Hitler and Nazism has a dual function: it provides a sense of detachment from the Nazi past, marking contemporary Germans as completely different; and it contributes to perpetuating the presence of the Nazi past in contemporary discourse.

During the whole book, Holocaust humour is regarded as a complex, ambiguous phenomenon, combining positive and negative effects for society. Anti-Semitic and racist Holocaust humour are the only ones Steir-Livny distinguishes and opposes to all the other kinds of Holocaust humour. This humour is valued negatively as it mostly supports Holocaust denial. Regardless the heated discussion on its acceptability, Holocaust humour has been intensified during the last decades. Rosenfeld (2015) claims that the Nazi era loses its historical specifics and exceptionality, and has been normalised and trivialised with the help of humour. He compares the black humour used by the victims in the times of the Holocaust, to the current popular Holocaust humour.

Nonetheless, Steir-Livny argues that the Jewish-Israeli Holocaust humour in Hebrew may not be such a case: in the Israeli culture Holocaust humour may function differently compared to other western cultures. She discusses the development of Holocaust humour in Israeli history, from almost an absolute taboo to a widespread phenomenon of the modern Israeli society. She analyses its functions in Israel as a place with a unique Holocaust awareness. Starting from the exceptional humour of a Holocaust survivor, Joseph Bau, whose stories and caricatures combined dramatic and humoristic perspectives right from the times of the Holocaust, she traces how in the 1980s and the 1990s the Holocaust narrative in the Israeli

identity had intensified and become a central part of everyday discourse. By that time, many Holocaust survivors had published their memoires, while second- and third-generation survivors began to discuss how the trauma had changed their lives, through literature and art. Finally, on the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day in 1997, people began swapping Holocaust jokes on the Internet, which evoked a heated discussion.

A number of studies of Holocaust humour under Nazism mentioned in the book illustrate the gradual entrance of the Holocaust humour also into research. Levin (2004), Bondi & Naor (2008), Ostrower (2009) and others provided examples of jokes, skits, songs, and caricatures used during the Nazi occupation, in ghettos and concentration camps, and they presented such humour as an integral part of the life there, perceived as a trace of freedom under the unbearable living conditions.

Steir-Livny regards Israel as a unique place of Holocaust awareness, where Holocaust humour plays a special role, working as a defence mechanism against the collective trauma. Victimised awareness shapes Israeli's identity, and the trauma is transmitted from one generation to another not only in the families, but also through the whole society. Thus, the terms *second-* and *third-generation survivors* describe not only biological offspring of the Holocaust survivors, but the whole generations. This phenomenon differentiates Israel from all the other countries, where there is a big gap in the Holocaust awareness between biological offspring and other Jewish people of the same age. Thus, the term *second-generation survivor*, initially proposed as a clinical concept, becomes a common cultural phenomenon in Israel, meaning people who were born after 1945 (second-) and in the 1960s and the 1970s (third-generation survivors) and were raised in the atmosphere of intense Holocaust awareness. Moreover, in Israel the trauma is related not only to the past. The current Israeli-Arab conflict and the threat of terroristic attacks create a continuing feeling of danger and anxiety in society.

Steir-Livny turns to the Freudian understanding of humour as a defence mechanism. In this view, LaCapra (2000) distinguished two forms of collective memory of the Holocaust: "acting out" – when the events of the past are reborn and experienced in the present; and "working though" – when turning to the past is accompanied with a critical distance from it and the boundaries between the past and the present are clear. Steir-Livny argues that Holocaust humour in Hebrew, spread in Israel, should be perceived as a healthy defence mechanism of a post-traumatic society rather than as a threat to the Holocaust memory.

In the second part of the book, titled "Holocaust humour, satire, and parody in Israeli culture", the author presents different perspectives on Holocaust humour. Steir-Livny analyses the intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust trauma and distinguishes the relevant studies into three main schools. The first involves clear unique characteristics of the second-generation survivors, such as suspiciousness, fear, over-protectiveness, interpersonal problems, feelings of grief, guilt, anger, withdrawnness, a constant preoccupation with the Holocaust. The second school insists that second-generation survivors do not have integral psychological disorders, and distinguishing them is perceived in a negative manner, namely as stigmatization. The third school focuses on the relationship between first- and second-generation survivors, which differs a lot from one family to the other.

Steir-Livny illustrates the road trips to the parents' past through the analysis of the TV satire "The Chamber Quintet", the skit "Documentary", the documentary film "Daddy Come to the Fair", and the film "Pizza in Auschwitz". Acting out and re-enactments are illustrated by the novel "Our Holocaust", the graphic novel "A Property", and the poetry book "A Visitor's Guide to Birkenau".

Ridiculing the cultural intergenerational transmission is shown through the analysis of the TV satire "The Chamber Quintet", the film "Wings of Desire", the show "A One-Time Satire Show Number Four: A Birthday for Simcha Babayof and the Funeral for the State of Israel", the skit "A Berlin Museum", the play "Post-trauma, the Chaim Shtaim", the YouTube song

"Stop", and the sitcoms "The Traffic Light", "The Miller's Junction". Steir-Livny shows how second- and third-generation survivors turn themselves into collective memory agents in a twofold and contradictory manner: by fighting against the acting out of the trauma in the Israeli present, and on the other hand, by creating another layer of acting out through integrating Holocaust in their everyday life. With humour, the horrifying events appear less frightening, but more present at the same time.

Probably the most interesting part for the non-Israeli reader is the detailed analysis of the Holocaust Remembrance Day Ceremonies in Israel, which is significant for this society both at a cultural level and at the level of individual personality development. In particular, the author focuses on alternative ceremonies which arose in contemporary Israel and, to a great extent, are based on Holocaust humour. She analyses the multiple narratives, the mosaic of memories and counter-memories, which have changed the traditional Holocaust narrative and the forms of its memory. Thus, she describes the Tmuna ceremonies, the Remembrance in the Living Room, and the Beit Lihiot ceremonies in Holon.

Sahara Blau initiated the alternative ceremony at the Tmuna Theatre at the beginning of the 2000s in order to revitalise the Remembrance Day for the youth. People of different generations told stories about how the Holocaust influenced their lives. Along with grief and sadness, the ceremony contained a more light-hearted attitude, including Holocaust Humour, which was strongly criticised at the beginning.

The Remembrance in the Living Room is a social initiative which began in 2011, proposed by Adi Altschuller to commemorate the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day at home, in the circle of friends. Giving emphasis to intimacy and diversity, the ceremony became popular very quickly. The initiators distinguish three main parts of the evening: the testimony of a Holocaust survivor, the artistic part, and the open discussion, which includes Holocaust humour as an integral part.

The Beit Lihiot ceremonies in Holon were conducted by Tzippi Kichler from 1999 to 2012, and were termed the "vigil". Her chaotic ceremonies drew on humour, laughter, spontaneity, and unconventional dialogues. The idea was to allocate a private home, where Holocaust survivors could come to spend their time together, having coffee, exchanging their memories, and just hang out. It also functioned as an educational centre for teenagers and youths. This experience was quite a successful one and was described in the four volumes of the book "Lihiot" with stories and photographs. Kichler believes that Holocaust humour is a remedy for the soul, which deconstructs the horror, and hence should be used consciously. The double perspective of her approach, both serious and humorous, was reflected in the fact that she participated in the traditional ceremonies or connected her own ceremonies to them, but afterwards she started "the party": the vigil was for those who would like to laugh and to celebrate life. This part was based exactly on Holocaust humour and laughter. Steir-Livny concludes that the alternative ceremonies do not cheapen the Holocaust memory, as the participants have not detached themselves from the trauma; on the contrary, they cannot detach themselves from it – that is why they take part in the ceremonies.

Steir-Livny presents how humour is currently being instrumentalised and commercialised, thus becoming a kind of commodity in the Israeli culture. She describes how younger generations try to fight this instrumentalization using humour. She analyses the series "The Arab Work" of Sayed Kashua, a successful satire on the relationships between Arab and Israeli families in Israel. Kashua suggests that laughter makes people equal, thus allowing them to say the truth and to be heard. Steir-Livny compares comedy and satire in regard to their common function – reforming society. Following Simpson (2003), she speaks about the three functions of satire: aggressive, intellectual (superiority), and social (group cohesion). She shows how the most successful satirical TV shows in Israel, namely "The Chamber Quintet", "It's a Wonderful Country", and "The Nation's back", articulate the powerful position of the

Holocaust in the collective and individual identities of people in contemporary Israel, and criticise its instrumentalisation and commercialisation. Steir-Livny also reveals that fighting against Holocaust instrumentalisation through humour results in turn in its self-instrumentalisation, thus strengthening the trauma and providing a new way of acting it out.

Steir-Livny explores Holocaust humour also as a tool of political and social protest in Israel. She describes how the leftists use it in a fight against the right-wing government policy. On the other hand, Holocaust humour increases social cohesion among left-wingers in Israel. Analysing popular memes, such as "The Mufti Made Me Do It" and others, Steir-Livny shows an inherent feature of humour nature in general: its ambivalent, contradictory nature, and the instability of its meanings. Thus, those who use humour, satire, and parody to protest against the use of the Holocaust by the right-wing, use the Holocaust themselves in satirical texts presenting their own political and social agenda.

Steir-Livny presents Holocaust humour also as a way to reveal and discuss ethnic issues. She concludes that current Mizrahi humoristic texts reflect the manner, in which the offspring of immigrants from Asia and North Africa try to cope both with the trauma and with their exclusion from its commemoration. These satirical texts can be interpreted in a polysemous way: as a reaffirmation of the Holocaust as an Ashkenazi trauma, and as the opposite, that is, as a confirmation of the Holocaust as a living part of the young Mizrahim identity.

The author analyses the humoristic use of Hitler's image in Hebrew. In recent decades, ridiculing Hitler became a widespread phenomenon, especially popular on the Internet. Such websites as "Kitler", "Things that look like Hitler", "Hitler Rants" memes illustrate that Hitler became an internet icon. Again Steir-Livny claims that the worries about this phenomenon could be relevant to the rest of the world, but not to Israel, where such humour functions as a defence mechanism. Humour lampooning Hitler in Israel does not normalise his image, does not threaten serious discussions about him, which is an integral part of education in Israel, but, on the contrary, increases its presence in daily life.

A chapter about internet humour completes the analysis. The author argues that Holocaust jokes in Hebrew are a separate genre. She compares Holocaust jokes in modern Israeli society in the Hebrew language to those told by Jews during the Holocaust. Providing a number of examples, she concludes that, although jokes that ridiculed Hitler during the Holocaust or on the Israeli TV nowadays were/are common, there are very few Holocaust jokes on Hebrew internet sites that ridicule Hitler. Most of them are instead self-deprecating, ridiculing the victims and keeping him in the position of the vicious Führer. Steir-Livny identifies some unique elements in contemporary Israeli Holocaust jokes: some jokes combine Holocaust with modern technologies, some use wordplay or a combination of concepts taken from the Holocaust and from Hebrew words and expressions, some refer to the later outcomes of the Holocaust, and some link the Holocaust with the current terror attacks in Israel. The book ends with clear conclusions.

The book is written in a typical academic style, but at the same time contains a rich collection of vivid examples of the Holocaust humour, through which Steir-Livny analyses the past and the present of the Israeli culture. The book may be useful for a wide range of scholars within humour and laughter research, but also more generally culture, history, art, sociology, psychology, and others.

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