

Book review

Grzybowski, Przemysław Paweł (2020). *The Laughter of Life and Death: Personal Stories of the Occupation, Ghettos and Concentration Camps to Educate and Remember*. Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo UKW.

Laughter, as indicated in the title of this book, is indeed a serious matter. Hundreds of studies, going back centuries, have attempted to examine and analyse humour, satire, parody, their numerous influences on people, and their role in society. One of the topics in this broad field is humour in times of crisis. Black humour (or gallows humour) has frequently been studied, and in a wide range of contexts. It has been shown to be an effective defence mechanism against fear of death and plays a significant role in maintaining physical and mental health.

The topic of humour during the Holocaust was marginalised for many years. Research only began to acknowledge the importance of humour for the victims at the turn of the millennium. One classic book on the subject is Haya Ostrower's *It Kept Us Alive. Humour in the Holocaust* (2014). She describes humour as one of the most efficient psychological responses in the hierarchy of defence mechanisms. In the horrifying conditions under the Nazis, laughter was a genuine spiritual rebellion against reality. In addition to research on Holocaust humour during the Holocaust itself, recent studies have begun to examine contemporary Holocaust humour around the world (e.g. Slucki et al. 2020).

The Laughter of Life and Death acknowledges the criticality of humour in times of crisis. Grzybowski has a specific personal interest in the topic since he volunteers as a medical clown in hospitals, hospices and various care institutions, where he “witnesses laughing in places and circumstances which most of readers might find unusual” (p. 10).

Grzybowski collected comic material covering the 1939-1945 period from diaries, memoirs and testimonies. He considers personal stories to be a major source of humour and discusses the topic through this prism (pp. 14-15). He defines his volume primarily as a collection of examples, and as a source book rather than a study: “I have made efforts to avoid commenting, assessing and interpreting the facts described in the examples” (p. 10).

The book is divided into three parts preceded by an introduction. The first part, entitled “Quite seriously about laughter,” is a theoretical discussion on humour, laughter, satire and parody in times of crisis. It deals with laughter, humour, and satire as physiological phenomena, but also examines the importance of *laughter communities* in times of crisis in which unexpected or provoked laughter tends to bring about positive emotions (p. 29). Grzybowski defines 8 categories of laughter in his corpus: *time* (when does one laugh?), *subject* (who laughs?), *presence* (who does one laugh with?), *object* (what and/or who does one laugh at?), *purpose* (why does one laugh?), *competence* (what preparation goes into making someone laugh?), *emotions* (what are the emotional determinants of someone who laughs?), and *function* (what function does laughter fulfil in a particular situation?). In each category, the specific pages where an example of this category appears in the book are referenced. The rest of the book is divided according to other criteria as detailed below.

The second part entitled “The laughter of victims, executioners and gawkers” is composed of a brief historical background on the German invasion of Poland, the creation of the ghettos and concentration camps and a collection of examples from testimonies which discuss various aspects of humour. This part is divided chronologically and thematically into several sections: “pre-Nazi Poland,” “Poland under the Nazi occupation,” “ghetto,” and “concentration camps.” In each part, there are examples of the kind of humour that developed under the harsh conditions prevailing there.

In the third part entitled “Comical (artistic, street, prison) creative activity during the occupation,” there is no preliminary general discussion. It is comprised of examples representing various types of humour during WWII. The epilogue, entitled “Post-laughter” discusses the development of Holocaust humour in the Western world after WWII.

In the Introduction, Grzybowski reminds his readers that examining humour during these times is a complex subject. He rightfully states that

[t]he culture of laughter shaped during the war and terror of occupation is a small section of a reality dominated by crime, plunder, genocide, pain and death. I would not like any of my readers to get the impression that life in those times was funny and laughter was common (p. 12).

Grzybowski suggests referring to people who use humour as the “people of laughter,” who, in spite of their own suffering, cheered up others by making them laugh or by laughing themselves (p. 15).

The examples are diverse and interesting, but the book has several shortcomings. Grzybowski does not define his corpus in detail. He writes in several places that he researched memoirs written by soldiers, prisoners in ghettos and concentration camps, people under occupation and perpetrators, but he does not explain who these people were, and why were they selected. In the numerous examples throughout the book, he only states the person’s name, which makes it difficult to determine whether the speaker is a Jew or a non-Jew. It is only clear that he is referring to Jews in the subchapter entitled “Ghetto.” The specific identity of the individuals is seldom understood from the testimonies. Statistics may come in handy here: the word *Holocaust* is mentioned in the book 30 times. The word *occupation* (all Poles, Jews and non-Jews, were victims of the occupation) appears 118 times.

This obfuscation is of crucial political-historical significance. Over the last seven years, the Polish government controlled by the PiS party has insisted that non-Jewish Poles were victims of the Nazis just as the Jews were and has also waged war against scholars who suggest otherwise. It has taken steps to undermine studies that show that groups of Poles took an active part in the extermination of the Jews, such as the works of Jan Grabovsky (2013), Jan Tomasz Gross (2001), and Barbara Engelking (2016), by ignoring the obvious fact that a person can be a victim and a victimiser.

Grzybowski summarises the non-Jewish Polish attitude towards the Jews as follows:

For a long time, hardly anyone behind the wall [meaning non-Jewish Poles in the Arian side of Warsaw] was aware of the drama the inhabitants of ghettos were going through and of the number of Holocaust victims, which was growing every day. Some tried to support Jews by helping in their escape from the ghetto or by hiding them. Others were indifferent and some still blindly stuck to their anti-Semitic contempt, joked about their persecuted neighbours, helped the Nazis to catch and kill them, which raised terrible fear and disbelief of those who could not agree with the nightmare (p. 99).

Thus, in his hagiography which restricts the question of Poles as the Nazis’ willing collaborators to Warsaw, only “some” Poles were perpetrators. In the following paragraph, he cites Marek Edelman’s testimony in which he talks about Warsaw and states that perhaps “only a handful”

of Poles were in favour of what happened in the Warsaw ghetto. This minimisation and definition enables Grzybowski to turn the vast majority of non-Jewish Poles into *gawkers* – a term he uses which exonerates most Poles from any active persecution of the Jews. The claim that only fringe elements in non-Jewish Polish society collaborated with the Nazis was the classic stance in Poland until the turn of the millennium. Since then, historians (some of whom are Poles) have demonstrated that tens to hundreds of thousands of Poles took an active part in the genocide of the Jews. The works of the renowned historians mentioned above and others are completely absent from this book, thus enabling the author to paint a much mellower portrait of non-Jewish Poles. In addition, focusing solely on Warsaw enables him to disregard research on other parts of Poland which has clearly shown the wide-scale collusion of the Poles in the persecution of the Jews and in acts of murder.

Correlatively, Grzybowski's definition of *gawkers* is problematic. He describes them as

witnesses of crisis-related phenomena, in which – for various reasons – they do not want and/or do not have to participate, because they are not aware of their occurrence, do not belong to the societies directly affected by the crisis and are indifferent to them (p. 33).

However, this perception of passive *bystanders* has been completely deconstructed in the last three decades. Historian Raul Hilberg (1993) categorised *bystanders* into *helpers*, *gainers*, and *onlookers*. More recently, scholars have followed in his footsteps and showed that the category of *bystander* in fact encompasses a wide range of actors and behaviours. Certain terms refer to people who remained passive (*onlookers*, *observers*, *witnesses*). Some refer to the fact that certain individuals benefitted from these crimes and gained materially; for example, by acquiring Jewish property (*gainers*); others depict the ways the local populations engaged in these crimes (*collaborators* and *perpetrators*) (see, for example, the works of Ehrenreich & Cole 2005; Bajhor & Low 2016; Barnett 2017). By contrast, certain individuals rebelled against the Nazis, were part of the local resistance, helped Jews momentarily, or risked their lives to provide safety and refuge (*The Righteous among the Nations*). This debate, which is not mentioned at all, and the term *gawkers* frees almost all Poles of any responsibility or complicity in the persecution and killing of the Jewish people.

In addition, Grzybowski states that

What I have assumed is that most of the readers have a basic, “coursebook” information on the course of World War II, the occupation, the Holocaust, etc. Therefore, I have decided not to present this. There are many works on particular subjects, so those in need of information may supplement their knowledge (p. 11).

It is true that there is ample information about the Holocaust, but as a Polish scholar, he is certainly well aware of the problematic attitudes towards the Holocaust that have flourished in Poland since the turn of the millennium and especially in the last seven years, alongside the serious and extremely important works of Polish Holocaust researchers. In this environment, I believe, he should have begun with some general facts that situate the context of the humorous texts. His review of the ghettos and concentration camps is too superficial. The subchapter is entitled “Ghetto” in the singular. Why? How can the reader understand the high numbers of ghettos that existed in Poland (not to mention other places in Europe) or grasp the scope or nature of the Nazi's Final Solution? Grzybowski even states that he chose not to differentiate between concentration camps and death camps and simply refers to them all as “concentration camps” (p. 14). How can one relate to them as the same?

Another key piece of information that should have appeared involves the context of each example. For instance, example 11 (pp. 75-76) entitled “Adina Blady-Szwajgier about the

carousel at the Warsaw Ghetto.” First of all, the title is misleading since of course there was no carousel in the Warsaw ghetto. The carousel was on the Aryan side of Warsaw, outside the ghetto. This example presents a tragic story, which was commemorated in Czesław Miłosz’s poem “Campo di Fiori” (1943). In April 1943, the Warsaw ghetto uprising began when the Nazis tried to exterminate the ghetto. The Nazis stormed the ghetto and slaughtered the starving Jews who fought them by hiding or turning by force against them. Meanwhile, outside on the Aryan side, the non-Jewish Poles were celebrating Easter with entertainment in the form of a carousel for their children to ride. How can a reader who is not a historian understand the shocking testimony of the Polish onlooker? Without the proper context, the examples cannot be understood. Grzybowski explains this specific incident pages later in the subchapter entitled “Ghetto,” but I doubt that the reader will recall. In other examples, there is no context at all. Notably as well, the quotes are provided without a date, which would have added considerably to understanding their historical context, which, of course, changed over the almost six years of WWII.

Moreover, in the Introduction, Grzybowski states that: “No general, theoretical, and interdisciplinary monograph has been published so far, which has presented the circumstances of laughter in the life of individuals, groups and societies functioning during the occupation” (p. 11). This is not entirely true, since he himself is familiar with Ostrower’s (2014) book (which is mentioned in footnote 185), but he does not use it as a source in his summary of victims’ humour.

Ostrower and other scholars mainly analysed victims’ black and self-deprecating humour. Grzybowski provides additional examples of humour by bystanders and perpetrators. This is a very important addition, but it is not accompanied by proper research or by a factual differentiation between victims, perpetrators and the various behaviours of “bystanders.” According to Grzybowski, “the memories, reports and examples collected in this book pertain to laughter as a factor which made survival easier” (p. 18). This is true for the victims, but since he also presents humour by “bystanders and perpetrators” he should have discussed the role of humour for them. This topic is not analysed, and the readers are left with the humour itself, without being able to probe or understand its psychological origins and impact on Nazis and the non-Jewish local population.

The editing and choice of the chapters is somewhat problematic as well. The subchapter entitled “Occupation” is a good example. Whom does it deal with? The occupation of Poland took place from 1939 to 1945. Afterwards, there are subchapters entitled “Ghetto” and “Concentration camps.” Does this imply that the chapter on the “Occupation” deals with people who were not ghettoised or sent to concentration camps? What about the period before the ghettos and camps were established? Chronologically, the chapters entitled “Ghetto” and “Concentration camps” should have been part of the subchapter “Occupation” and not come after it.

It is also unclear why sometimes Grzybowski summarises the cultural humorous activity of the era in question (i.e. occupation) or the place (i.e. ghettos, concentration camps) before turning to the examples (Chapter 2), but at others, he simply gives examples (Chapter 3).

In the chapter “Ending,” when he relates to post-war Holocaust humour, Grzybowski suddenly reproduces examples from other parts of the world. This choice is also unclear. The description of the changes in Holocaust humour globally is partial. Seminal books on the topic are not used or mentioned. Israeli humour, satire and parody – a notable phenomenon in the last 30 years – is not even mentioned. Statements such as “[t]he jokes about war and concentration camps have been present in the public sphere not only in Poland but also in Germany, England, the USA and Sweden” (p. 241) are inaccurate since Holocaust humour nowadays is a global phenomenon fuelled by the internet.

Reading testimonies of victims, Nazis, and the non-Jewish local population during the Holocaust is always interesting and their subjective point of view enriches our knowledge of these times, especially with respect to humour, which was taboo in research until the last decades. The general summary of comic performances during the occupation in Chapter 2 is also important for a better understanding of the period and the variety of resistance mechanisms implemented in times of terror. However, the book could have benefitted from tighter writing and editing such as establishing a clear corpus, depicting the context of WWII in Poland and for each example cited, not shunning the debate over the role played by Poles in the extermination of the Jews, explaining the difference between the persecution of Jews and the persecution of non-Jews, explaining the identity of each witness, differentiating the testimonies into victims, perpetrators and bystanders, and explaining the differences in the role of humour for each of these groups.

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