San Antonio Review

Review: Never Forget Your Name

Ash Lange

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Reviewed:**[Never Forget Your Name: The Children of Auschwitz](#)****by Alwin Meyer****Polity Press, 2022**

Today, more than seventy-five years after the liberation of the concentration camps and roughly sixty-five years after the closure of the last of the DP camps in Germany, we find ourselves at a juncture in history that one would be tempted to call unprecedented — Americans taking to the streets, chanting ‘The Jews will not replace us’ and the January 6 2021 attack on the Capitol. But one only needs to look at the images of the American Nazis gathered for a rally in a previous incarnation of Madison Square Garden to see that we have, indeed, been here before.

A walk past any book store proves you with the information that far from being forgotten, the Holocaust/Shoah/Khurbyn¹ looms large in the general consciousness; one is presented with shop window displays filled with books titled *The (Profession) of (Name of KZ)*. A trip to the cinema produces the same results — the last few years alone have provided filmed versions of *The Painted Bird*, and *Suite Française* as well as *Son of Saul*, *Jojo Rabbit*, *Vigil*, *The Zookeeper’s Wife*, etc...Social media platforms are

hardly immune, with TikTok Anne Frank impersonators, and an Anne Frank video diary on [YouTube](#), all with varying degrees of authenticity, and/or blessing from concerned organisations. One can even play a [game](#) online, via the Jewish Museum of Berlin, about restitution of Nazi-looted art.

While there are (and always have been) those who were *not* there shaping the recollections and understanding of the Shoah as it happened — as well as creating new, fictional narratives — those who *were* present were recording, preserving and living, creating a continuity. The famous clandestine photographer of the Kovno ghetto, George Kadish, captured every day life, defiant calls for vengeance and the eventual liquidation of the ghetto. The Paper Brigade of the Vilna ghetto who hid the archives of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (Yivo), attempted to preserve what life and culture had been prior to the war. And those who could speak, and still can speak, did and do.

Much of what is commonly known and taught are extraordinary cases, the unusual, rather than the ordinary — in as much as any narrative of the Shoah is ordinary. By now, the average consumer of media is aware of Oskar Schindler, Elie Wiesel, Simon Wiesenthal and of Anne Frank, though perhaps could not give many specific details. They perhaps know of the Nuremberg Trials, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and Eichmann on trial in Jerusalem. We use Hannah Arendt's description of the banality of evil to apply to a myriad number of subjects, robbing it of its full weight, power and menace.

Never Forget Your Name, by Alwin Meyer and published in English by *Polity Press*, is an admirable addition to accounts by survivors and of victims. Here are the stories of ordinary children, who suddenly — or not so suddenly, but creepingly, insidiously — found themselves to be marked out for destruction.

The vastness of the human tragedy of Auschwitz, and the Shoah as a whole, is illuminated through this handful of lives and people whose trust Meyer worked to gain in order to tell their stories. The children are given faces and name, made individuals in what is too often a faceless sea of horror. Crucially, these are entirely real faces, not fictional children whom the reader is enticed to care about by clever angles, soaring violins or by the efforts of determined casting agents.

Meyer's book charts the journeys of some of these children, a minute fraction of the children who were deported to Auschwitz, not only to rejoin their communities and families, but also to resume their own interrupted lives and continue to live with — and in the shadow of — what had happened to them. Through painstaking research,

interviews with the survivors and their families and descendants, he charts their reintegration and return to life through DP Camps, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (The 'Joint'), sanatoriums, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA, later replaced by IRO), Occupational Rehabilitation and Training (ORT) and other means, as well as their marriages, friendships and families.

The children that Meyer traces come from diverse backgrounds — traditional, religious, westernised, socialist — from a multitude of countries, classes, and spoke different languages. They represent, in effect, a cross-section of pre-war Jewish Europe; the now so frequently-romanticised world of the shtetl, but also the great metropolitan centres. Meyer helps to build these small, lost worlds, through the survivors' recollections of their neighbours, their houses and schools, what they ate and what sort of mischief they accomplished with their friends, as well as through historical facts of how their communities came to exist.

Even Auschwitz itself, *Oshpitzin* in Yiddish, had been a vibrant, majority Jewish town until 1939. By the time the first major transport arrived in 1940, Meyer makes clear, it's transformation was sickeningly plain.

We see the Nazi party's ascent through the eyes of these children, witness the change in their neighbours attitudes towards them and their families, the stripping of their right, as well as the moment where it was no longer possible to leave. From the German epicentre, we are allowed to see the inexorable spread of horror. Through the eyes and memories of children, countries and governments fall one by one. Their small worlds become smaller still, and particular days are recalled — the day they were forced to move again, the day their father or sister was arrested, deported. The day their country was invaded.

For some, Auschwitz was merely the final destination of a long journey, having been interned in ghettos and other camps before being deported to the sprawling complex.

A minute portion of the children deported to Auschwitz managed to survive, accomplishing this in various ways, either through the kindness of others in sharing rations, through performing musically, writing songs and poems, through clinging to each other or to their religious faith and by pure chance. Most, of course, did not survive.

Once the immediate physical terror and deprivations of Auschwitz had passed for the children who did survive, there remained not only deep psychological scars of their trauma and dehumanisation, and serious illness (typhus, tuberculosis and malnutrition were all rampant and likely to be fatal) but there lingered the question of where they would go and what there was left for them to find there.²

This book represents the fruit of many years of research. The children of Auschwitz have been a long running interest for Meyer, an award-winning journalist who has also written about right-wing extremism, as he began searching for their traces at age of twenty-two. Most recently, he has published a work about mothers, children and birth in Auschwitz — 60 of the children who were liberated from the camp, he informs us, had been born there.

Never Forget Your Name has arrived in English from the German — translation itself being a sometimes fraught process that leaves us with less than the original, stripping someone essential away in the process.³ Translator Nick Somer has provided a fluid, lucid translation that serves and illuminates the text.

It is not significant that books such as this, and the recent *Aftermath*, by Harald Jänener, are written and published in Germany, as they continue to examine their own history. America, as well as many other countries, would be wise to take such a critical lens to themselves and their past.⁴

The children of *Never Forget Your Name* are not the internationally known and celebrated survivors, though some stories, such as that of the opera *Brundibar*, have been related elsewhere. They are not, on the whole, the partisans of the ghettos or avengers. What these children represent is something far more important — stories that would otherwise slip through our fingers for their relative anonymity.

Mediation of the experiences and memories of the victims, partisans and survivors is hardly a new issue.⁵ This rewriting and recontextualisation was occurring even as the Shoah continued, and continues even now. A Yiddish play about the Warsaw ghetto uprising ran in New York only a year after the event itself, before the war had come to an end. Later, there came the juncture between books written in Yiddish (and other languages) for survivors themselves and fellow Jews. *Schindler's List*, perhaps the most famous of all Shoah films and 'consumable' by the largest public, shifts the narrative to, as Dara Horn [points out](#) so concisely in her *Adventures with Dead Jews* podcast, the story of heroic non-Jew surrounded by pernicious Jewish stereotypes.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus (I+II)* and its companion book, *Metamaus*, attempt to confront this issue of mediation head on — we see the shift from a survivor's story, Spiegelman's father's, to the son. Spiegelman attempts to make personal [sense](#) of this story after his father's death following the release of the first book, as well as struggling with his own inadequacy to do so and the fact that he has achieved a significant degree of fame, as he himself depicts it, atop a [pile](#) of the dead bodies of others.

The antidote we do have to this obfuscation, framing of narratives, poor education for teachers on how to teach their pupils events of this magnitude,⁶ as well as inane demands that both sides of every historical event must be taught with equal moral weight and enthusiasm,⁷ no matter what that other side may be is — as Spiegelman and the monumental film project, *Shoah*, demonstrate — survivor and victim testimonies. We can strip away the other hands, other words, and coloured filters and see the unaltered images, hear the unedited words. Where this isn't possible, we need respectful works such as *Never Forget Your Name* to close this chasm.

The further in time that we move from an event, the more crucial the means by which we recount, recalls, and teach the event — and exactly how each of these actions are mediated. Ideally, if the experience and testimony is to receive any mediation at all, it must be one that is trusted by the witness — which Meyer has more than achieved.

We are a world in danger of forgetting; not the Shoah itself, but its details and precise significance. We have been presented with so many fictional victims, real face and names are sinking into obscurity. As we sail closer and closer to the looming rocks of fascism, we are losing even these child survivors. Very soon, all that will be left is their testimony and their trust that it will be transmitted, at the time when we need their presence the most.

How, exactly, we proceed to look back while moving forwards, like Walter Benjamin's famous Angel of History, is vital. The past can, if we let it, provide the map for the future.

An important book at a crucial time.

Never Forget Your Name by Alwin Meyer (translated by Nick Somers) is available from Polity Press the 27th of January, 2022, International Holocaust Remembrance Day. A copy was provided for review.

Ash Lange is the San Antonio Review's Prose editor.

Footnotes

1. The Holocaust is the most inclusive term, as it includes all categories of victims. As this book is focused on Jewish victims, the term Shoah is used most frequently in this review. *Khurbyn* is the Yiddish term, meaning 'destruction' or 'catastrophe' and it also used to refer to the destruction of the Temple. [↵](#)

2.

This was not a clear-cut situation, as initially, repatriation was the aim. Then it was determined that while some did not wish to return home, others were rendered unable. A second wave of displaced persons came from the east, as Soviet Russian and, in particular, Poland, remained hostile to returning Jews.

In terms of reunification of families, US army [Chaplain Abraham Klausner](#) was instrumental, compiling the *Sharit Ha-Platah* (Surviving Remnant) lists of survivors. The first volume, in addition to listing survivors and their locations, also included a page informing DPs of their rights. [↵](#)

3. Many survivors were later effectively locked out of testifying about their experiences, as their languages (as in the case of Yiddish at Nuremberg) were not officially recognised by the court for their purposes. [↵](#)

4. See, for example, recent Polish legislation that prohibits any insinuation that Poland was involved in the Holocaust beyond victimhood, and the recent prosecution of two historians judged to have fallen afoul of this [law](#). [↵](#)

5. Perhaps the most famous case of mediation, translation and packaging of a survivor's memoir and experience can be found in the case of Elie Wiesel's *Night*. The original Yiddish manuscript for *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* (And the World Kept Silent) was approximately 800 pages. It ran, much abridged in the *Forward* Newspaper, and was published in Yiddish at roughly 250 pages. What is today assigned (or not assigned) in high school and college classes today as 'Night' is

roughly 120 pages, translated from the French, filtered through the influence of a Catholic writer, François Mauriac. What is missing? In Wiesel's case, much of the [rage](#).

6. Teachers who do teach the Holocaust, and more states are mandating Holocaust education, are frequently ill-equipped to do so themselves. A recent example of such a failure was that of a 'role-playing lesson' in Washington, DC, at the end of last [year](#).

7. [Texas House Bill 3979](#), signed into law in September of 2021, barred the teaching of 'controversial' issues and mandated that if the subjects arose, they must be taught from all and opposing points of [view](#) 'without giving deference to any one perspective.'