

NONFICTION

A Writer Reckons With the Fact That 'People Love Dead Jews'

By Yaniv Iczkovits

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PEOPLE LOVE DEAD JEWS

Reports From a Haunted Present

By Dara Horn

In 2014, I traveled to Belarus to learn more about pre-World War II Jewish culture around Minsk. In the town of Motal, I spoke with a small group of locals, who recalled the Jewish neighbor who'd been a good friend of their parents, or that great klezmer band that had played at their uncle's wedding, or the amazing raspberry torte cake you could buy at the Jewish bakery. Just before we parted, the oldest in the group, a 93-year-old woman, approached me and, in a trembling voice, fighting back tears, said something softly in Belarusian.

"What did she say?" I asked Andrei, the translator who accompanied me. He replied: "She said that ever since the Jews left this place, the place is dead."

I was moved. The elderly woman had expressed — confessed, perhaps — the enormous void left by the deportation and annihilation of Motal's Jewish population. But as I thought more about her words, they became more disturbing. I tried to understand why, but I — a writer, after all — couldn't seem to find a way to describe my discomfort. I felt as if I'd reached the limits of my ability to express myself.

Reading Dara Horn's "People Love Dead Jews," I could feel the words coming back to me, as if I were reacquiring a language. Not a new language, in which you must learn a vocabulary and grasp the rules of grammar. But as in Platonic epistemology, where learning is essentially a recollection, I felt as if I were recollecting, retrieving something I had been asked to forget. From childhood on, as Horn points out, we are told to replace this language with a more symbolic one, consisting of all the familiar codes and tropes: "Those who do not learn the lessons of the Holocaust are bound to repeat them," say, or: "We will never forget."

Horn's main insight is that much of the way we've developed to remember and narrate Jewish history is, at best, self-deception and, at worst, rubbish. The 12 essays in her brilliant book explore how the different ways we commemorate Jewish tragedy, how we write about the Holocaust, how the media presents antisemitic events, how we establish museums to honor Jewish heritage, how we read literature with Jewish protagonists and even how we praise the "righteous among the nations" (those who saved Jews during the war), are all distractions from the main issue, which is the very concrete, specific death of Jews.

Even though each chapter reveals a different blind spot in our collective memory — ranging from Horn's visit to the Museum of Jewish Heritage in downtown Manhattan to her travel to the Jewish sites in Harbin, China — all the essays in the book show that when we learn to remember certain things in certain ways, we set the limits of what can be said, and what cannot be said, even as we might have the urge to say it. Horn thinks it's about time to say it, and this is why her book is at the same time so necessary and so disquieting.

Let us take Anne Frank's diary, for example. Horn examines the enormous success of "The Diary of a Young Girl," which has been translated into 70 languages and has sold over 30 million copies worldwide. Perhaps its most famous, most quoted sentence — "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart" — has inspired many people; considering how things ended for Anne, we find it astounding that she's still able to believe in people's essential goodness. But here is Horn's straightforward response: "It is far more gratifying to believe that an innocent dead girl has offered us grace than to recognize the obvious: Frank wrote about people being 'truly good at heart' before meeting people who weren't. Three weeks after writing those words, she met people who weren't."

Dara Horn Michael Priest

Horn's view is that Anne's words are inspirational exactly because her perspective is not only incomplete but also false. We take the easy way out rather than plumbing the depths of evil. We look for universal lessons in lieu of attending to the actual persecution of Jews. Horn wants us not to be encouraged by what seems to be the proliferation of these forms of remembering, a proliferation spawned by an idealized, graceful perspective that has as its aim to reaffirm the values of the very culture that, in spite of it all, shattered so many Anne Franks.

In three other essays, Horn deals with the upswell of anti-Semitism in the United States. Here it becomes clear that her concern about the ways we remember is inextricable from the way we relate to what is happening today. Horn claims that setting the Holocaust as the bar for anti-Semitism means that "anything short of the Holocaust is, well, not the Holocaust. The bar is rather high." According to Horn, this might explain the limited shelf life, so to speak, of current events like the gunning down of Jews in Pittsburgh, in San Diego, in New Jersey.

And then there's the moment of relief that Jews feel when we arrive at the famous questions in Act III of "The Merchant of Venice": "If you prick us, do we not bleed? ... If you poison us, do we not die?" So Shakespeare was not really an

antisemite, but rather, more benignly, a satirist when he limned Shylock's stereotypical Jewish character. After all, he is Shakespeare, and we want him on our side.

Or how we recognize the Chinese government's investment of \$30 million to restore "Jewish heritage sites" in Harbin, a city that was built by Russian Jewish entrepreneurs, who flourished there until they were no longer required.

"People Love Dead Jews" is an outstanding book with a bold mission. It criticizes people, artworks and public institutions that few others dare to challenge. Reading this book, I started to find the words I should have said to that woman in Motel. I should have responded that maybe Eastern Europe has been left with a void, but I have been left with hardly any family.

But there is a rare moment in Horn's book in which she admits the austerity of her own perspective. It's in "Legends of Dead Jews." The common family story that so many American Jews have heard about their surnames being changed at Ellis Island is a myth, she writes. The names weren't changed by mistake. American Jews preferred to change their names to be able to fit in, to blend in, to assimilate.

I expected Horn to criticize the purveyors of this legend. After all, they distorted the past to avoid the discomfort of its truth. But she writes: "Our ancestors could have dwelled on the sordid facts, and passed down that psychological damage. Instead, they created a story that ennobled us, and made us confident in our role in this great country." Perhaps revision of this sort does not always have to be about self-blinding. Perhaps, as Horn suggests, it is "an act of bravery and love." Some things are just too painful to say.

Reading Horn's beautiful words, I thought that maybe, after all, what this woman in Motal wanted, and needed, was a simple thank you, a handshake and a humble nod.