

Book Review

Remkes Kooistra, ed.: *Where was God? The lives and thoughts of Holocaust and World War II survivors*. Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2001. 204pp.

In a recent film on the Nuremberg trials an American psychologist, himself a Jew, tries to understand how a highly civilized people like the Germans could have unleashed the Holocaust on the Jews of Europe during World War II. How could the staff of the concentration and extermination camps go home after a day's "work," have dinner with their families, take their children to bed, and sing them a lullaby? The psychologist decided that this was possible because of a total and absolute absence of empathy for the camp inmates.

How the Holocaust could have happened remains, of course, a difficult question, and in *Where was God?* the editor, a retired pastor in the Christian Reformed Church, approaches it both from the perspective of Jews who survived the Holocaust and from his own perspective as a Christian. If God, the God of both Jews and Christians, is almighty and good, how could He have allowed the Holocaust to happen? The editor, who himself experienced the war as a young pastor in Holland and was involved in the resistance movement, answers in the introduction that God is not a *deus ex machina*, "always available to help us as soon as we call upon Him. We think that God is to be there for us, but the Bible reveals that God is there with us." (p.31)

The bulk of the book consists of interviews with survivors of

concentration camps about their experiences there, but also about the rebuilding of their lives after the camps. These interviews are part of a much larger project sponsored by the Committee on Jewish Studies and the Holocaust at the University of Waterloo in the mid-1980s. All those interviewed were asked how life in the concentration camps affected their faith in God then and subsequently, and because of the book's objective, the people featured in it all have something to say to the question: "Where was God?" Amongst these there are nine Polish Jews, one Hungarian Jew, one individual who had a Jewish father and a German mother, and then there is a written account by a (Catholic) Polish army officer, as well as excerpts from the autobiography of a Dutch Jew. The book ends with an excerpt from a novella, *The Night of the Girondists*, by Jacques Presser, a Dutch Jew, about the Dutch transit camp in Westerbork.

What emerges from the interviews is that in the concentration camps, believing Jews certainly asked "Where is God?" or doubted His existence. However, what was an eye-opener for this reviewer is that when life is reduced to the basic question of survival from one hour to the next, people eventually cease to ask or wonder about the existence of God, or where he might be in their suffering. Perhaps that required too much intellectual and emotional energy in the struggle for simple physical survival in the grim reality of the concentration camps. It was only after the war, it seems, that at least those whose interviews are published here began to deal with the

theological questions raised by the Holocaust, and not surprisingly, the answers given vary to a considerable degree. Some of those interviewed also expressed how important it was for them to put the experience of the concentration camps, and the hatred and bitterness it created, behind them, in order not to hand Hitler and his accomplices the final victory. As to punishment for those accomplices who are still living today, one person demanded that justice still be done, but another thought that there is little point in prosecuting men and women who are now in their eighties, and that the resources required to do so would be better spent educating the young about the Holocaust. A number of those interviewed also observed that the Jews from Western Europe were the first to succumb to the rigours of the concentration camp because they lacked the mental and physical toughness

required to survive, whereas the Polish Jews were already used to suffering and deprivation and consequently were better equipped to do so. Finally, the Polish army officer attributed the indescribable treatment of the Jews by the SS soldiers and officers largely to feelings of cultural and intellectual inferiority in the presence of their victims.

The existing literature on the Holocaust is, of course, enormous, but this book approaches the topic from an unusual yet valid angle. For the question "Where is/was God?" must have been asked at one time or another by most practising Jews who died in the extermination and concentration camps, as well as by those who survived.

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