Review
David Koker:
At the Edge of the Abyss:
A Concentration Camp Diary, 1943-1944

Robert Jan van Pelt (ed.), Michiel Horn and John Irons (trans.)
Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012. 410 p.
ISBN-10: 0810126362 / ISBN-13: 978-0810126367

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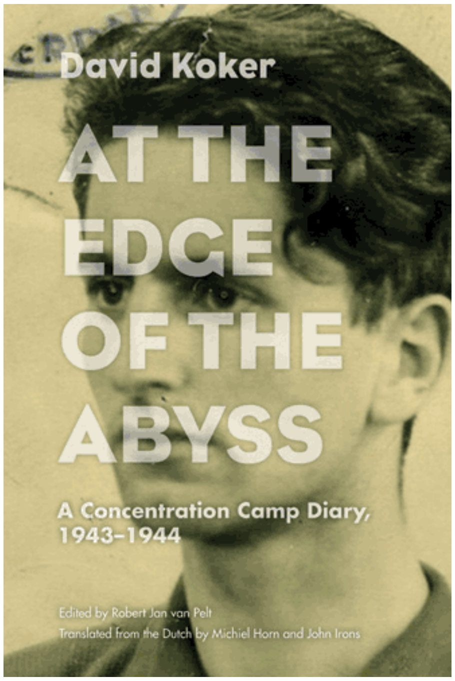
David Koker
AT THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS
A Concentration Camp Diary, 1943–1944
Edited by Robert Jan van Pelt
Translated from the Dutch by Michiel Horn and John Irons

To set oneself the task of bringing back to life the hallucinatory reality of a single human being, in a single camp, borders on sacrilege. The truer the tale, the more fictitious it appears. The secret must remain inviolate. Once revealed, it becomes myth, and can only be tarnished, diminished. In the end, words lose their innocence, their power to cast a spell. The truth will

Can. J. of Netherlandic Studies/Rev. can. d'études néerlandaises 33.1 (2012): 69-77

> never be written; like the Talmud, it will be transmitted from mouth to ear, from eye to eye. By its uniqueness, the Holocaust defies literature. We think we are describing an event; we transmit only its reflection.
>
> (White 1998, 172)

As a consequence of an ideology so pernicious one is reluctant to use the term 'ideology' to refer to it, David Koker was rounded-up, forcibly removed from his beloved Amsterdam, incarcerated in Vught, and discarded as trash in the death camps of Germany. Recognizing that writing in the camp could lead to his death, he paradoxically acknowledged that his Being was dependent upon his continuing inscription of the violence, despair, anger, apathy, immobilizing fear and even happiness that surrounded and penetrated him. The resulting texts, consisting of poems, letters, and a diary written mainly to his best friend Karel van het Reve and his girlfriend Nettie, constitute the center of *At the Edge of the Abyss: A Concentration Camp Diary, 1943-1944*. After the War, Dr. Van het Reve turned over these narrative materials to David's younger brother, Max Koker. Mr. Koker, who along with his mother and father was incarcerated in the Vught 'work camp' with David, was later transported, again with the rest of the Koker family, to Germany's death camps. Both he and his mother Judith managed to survive the War, although his mother would never recover from her nightmare. Max Koker was the force behind the very successful release of the diary in the Netherlands, and an integral component of the partnership between Michiel Horn, John Irons, and Robert Jan van Pelt that led to the current, very impressively translated, English edition.

In his preface, van Pelt notes that the historical references and personalities that transit David Koker's diary inspired further research by Michiel Horn and himself into the people and events David discusses. The published work is therefore enhanced with historical notes throughout David's journal and offers an *Appendix* that recounts the lives and fates of the main characters and of David's pre-war friends. Within the published compilation, David Koker's diary is situated as a devastating presence, the 'center' of the published work, an anguished liminal suspension located between the *Introduction* (David's life), and the *Epilogue* (David's death).

The *Introduction* acquaints us with David, a rather precocious boy; a teenager who exhibits a formidable emerging intellect; and the outlines of the man he might have been. Within the historical Amsterdam-Judaic community context, we experience his life in a happy, close family utterly committed to their lives in Amsterdam, as a young man of superior intelligence who nurtured close friendships with schoolmates equally curious about the world, a scholar grown rebellious and trying out new ideas while testing the logical limits of Zionism, a poet published before the war, a philosopher who eyed the human condition with a somewhat sardonic eye. I read the Introduction with a bittersweet awareness; a feeling of happiness that he had at least experienced this, interpenetrated by a deep, abiding melancholy: the awareness of his life unlived.

The *Epilogue* closes the life. While David's diary begins with his abduction and removal from the city he loved, his diary offers no closure: "and feel myself caught badly in the middle" (335), are the last words he left us. The editors pick up the narrative by recounting the available historical details connected to the final months of David's life and the subsequent fate of the rest of the Koker family. Coming after the diary, the *Epilogue* evokes a sense of total helplessness and despair as it moves relentlessly towards its denouement; David's body "ended up with 7,608 other corpses in the mass graves on the Leitenberg" (Van Pelt 2012, 346).

On the one hand I deeply appreciated the historical information footnoted throughout the text of the journal: it not only answers the 'I wonder what happened to him/her/them' questions that arise as we become acquainted with people in the camp, it also connects the diary to both context and people, constantly subverting White's observation that "the truer the tale, the more fictitious it appears" (White 1998, 172). The tendency to read Holocaust texts as occurring in mythological time is therefore countermanded by rooting David's experiences in 'reason', in history. As a reader, however, I noted an auxiliary effect of the aggregate information offered: the footnotes evoked desperation. There were times when I felt compelled to quickly flip through the notes, urgently seeking one that did not end in the words "they were murdered in Sobibor" or "he was murdered in Auschwitz". If I found one – and there were so few – far too few – I felt a moment of exhilaration, of triumph, as if evil had momentarily been defeated by a lone survivor. Those footnotes potentially deepen our objective awareness of the Holocaust through an emotional grasping of that reality; these were people; they had lives. The footnoted dead, like David, were human beings with unique hopes, dreams, fears, and longings. His diary narrative confronts us with their bravery, humanity, memories; we visualize the millions of shadowy dead through his narrative.

Confronted with the task of reviewing a camp diary I felt I was committing analytic sacrilege; commenting in any way on the text appears both unthinkable and impossible; representation fails. Yet this diary is written by a young man with a poet's soul, and in spite of my resistance to critically engaging his text, I feel compelled to elicit motivation from others to read it. It is an oral narrative committed to paper; oral in that it flows freely from David's mind, through his pencil, onto bits of paper. Because materials were scarce he had to make the most of every scrap, thus editing the edges of the Self he chose to represent was clearly difficult. Roughly halfway through his incarceration he tells us; "The nature of this diary; it describes facts. But in the objective sense. It doesn't suggest I live under these circumstances. The personal is not permitted here" (215). Even though he was writing for Karel and Nettie, David continually assessed his experiences and his narrative telling, analyzing why he chose to tell some stories and not others, probing why he chose to recount certain events within particular frameworks while discarding alternatives, and ruminating about how his stories and thoughts might be received. Referring to the trust that he placed in Karel and Nettie and that it was a necessary pre-requisite for the exposure of Self, he wondered if the recipients of his letters and diary would be able to really hear, to *grasp*, what he had to say (White 1998, 174). The latter was an obvious concern for David and he returns to it throughout the diary, although his understanding of the gap between his transmission of Self and his friends' possible apprehension of his narrative becomes increasingly profound in the final entries. He repeatedly tells his friends – whose images are fading as the days pass – that he needs them to *know*, to *understand* even his most dubious thoughts and deeds. Indeed, the paradigm of 'permissible disclosure' is clearly operative in the diary until we get to page 294, when the narrative alters. David becomes more preoccupied with the personal, less with "objective facts", a change deriving from the morning of his birthday when "Spitz reads an excerpt from a letter from Poland. Three people [his fiancée and her parents] are living with Moves [Dutch-Yiddish expression for 'they are dead']. And Moves is working overtime" (294).

Indeed the textual breaking point coming on the heels of the missive from Poland can be clearly discerned:

> We're standing on the edge. In the middle of life. But we can't move a step because before us is an absolute void. And this wouldn't be so important if another feeling hadn't settled in. I feel bigger and stronger with this knowledge. Disdain for one's own fate and for that of others is the necessary basis for every great style of life … without being indifferent to it, I can make peace with doom. Above all I can reconcile it when I see so much that's small and ugly go to ruin. That doesn't exclude pity. And it certainly doesn't exclude making an effort to hold on to life. (295)

From this point until the diary breaks off, David's self-reflection is almost fey. There were only a few pages left – was it because I knew that the abyss would swallow him that I read fore-knowledge into his narrative?

While David states that his writings only reveal what he is willing to disclose, his passing references to people, events, and his relentless self-examination force the reader into the gaps of his text; we experience the chaotic consequences of the complete disruption of previously taken-for-granted social transactions. 'Before-the-war' discourse no longer holds; Jews are not people and any interaction between a Jewish person and an 'Aryan' is conducted on the basis of dissimilar social symbols and understandings. David often inadvertently exposes the profound violations of shared cultural practices that governed pre-war social relations and notes their consequences. His disorientation is profound: "anyway life here is physically, spiritually, unconscious" (90); "there's nothing here to mark the time. I have a fierce headache. The days are empty and full. Undifferentiated: full" (106); "boredom that would make you weep if you had tears to weep with" (111). The loss of memory, both short and long term, is palpable throughout his prose. He doesn't remember what day it is. He can't recall beloved faces. This disjunction between life as it is and how it ought to be both worries him and strengthens his resolve to fight against the attacks on his personal cohesion. His poems and narrative reflection speak his self-despair, suffering, and periodic happiness, while his persistent self-inquisition addresses his urgent awareness that he must retain a sense of agency, he must hold on to himself.

In pursuit of that Agency, he seeks work in the camp and concurrently deconstructs his motives, his 'I':

> I wish I weren't such a coward. I wish I were less compliant. That if the Germans order something to be cleaned, I weren't so prompt in the execution. I wish I didn't try to do things quite so well. I have no negative attitude towards what they order us to do. I give in and hope to make something of it in accordance with German regulations. I want to have a job here: out of ambition. Everywhere I show up, I want to join in the work. In the vanguard. No matter whether it's good or bad. I wish I were less of an apple polisher. Less ambitious. (110)

Later David will ruthlessly analyze his moral Self-diminished and struggle to define a revised moral code that grounds the self. Knowing that the Germans have reduced his options to either working with them and surviving, or plotting against them and immediate transport to the Westerbork transit camp, he strives to enunciate a framework that reconciles these pernicious either/or choices. When he is able to save his family from transport due to his camp connections, he does so within the framework of a moral imperative newly conceived. Simultaneously he recognizes how very limited his ethical options have become.

Perhaps somewhat conveniently, since moral imperatives may understandably give way to expediency out of cruel necessity, David long sustained his belief in the 'myth of Poland' so judiciously disseminated by the German Reich, according to which people leaving Westerbork were being sent to Poland merely to work and conditions were relatively good in those camps. In this twisted German discourse, if parents or children had been sent ahead of each other to Westerbork, then they would be assigned to the next transport so that they could be together 'as a family in Poland'. David was therefore able to maintain that he was not sending fellow inmates to their deaths; instead, he was sending them to a better place. Yet at the same time he presents a countervailing discourse in his diary: there were German officials who tried to hold back transports; officials who used various pretenses to try to keep people in Vught. On the one hand: happier days in Poland; on the other: Germans sending signals that transport to Westerbork might not be what German official discourse claimed it to be. In the diary, although he makes earlier attempts, David does not reconcile this conflict in himself until the letter for Spitz arrives from Poland. Then he fully internalizes death; he acknowledges that there is no 'at-least-quite-comfortable' in Poland. Hope, and with it a goodly portion of his revised moral framework, dies, and he revises his understanding of Self and Other once again. Embedded within the Vught structure, the realization that working with the Germans delayed, but did not prevent transport, came slowly to David. The Reich's upper level officials were committed to the 'Jewish solution', and the men running Vught were eminently replaceable.

I experienced a number of ethical dilemmas while reading this text. The first was a certainty that I was violating the diary's author. David Koker – and it is impossible to think of him as anyone other than 'David' after connecting so intimately with him – was an intensely private person. He was writing primarily for two people: the girl he loved and the young man with whom he had an intense, deep, and abiding friendship. His entire text is oriented to those readers, arises from the trust he had in them, and is permeated with his determination that they should truly understand his thoughts, his reactions, his behaviour, warts and all. What would David have thought of me? What would his opinion have been of my reading lines that reveal aspects of his soul?

Secondly, there were times when I simply didn't like David, when I was appalled by his behaviour. An example: his analysis of the fact that the power exerted over him led him to exert gratuitous power over the children he taught. This sometime-dislike of David initially provoked a deep guilt in me. David was incarcerated in a concentration camp. How could I even think of critiquing his behaviour or morality? I realized, however, that guilt in this instance was counter-productive and unnecessary, that I was responding to David as a human being, not as an Icon. While I found it admirable that he could engage in a remorseless critique of his behaviour in relation to the schoolchildren and that he could name what he was doing, I also thought: Why keep it up then? In his diary he later dissects the impulses that informed his continuing behaviour and juxtaposes them to moments of great pity he felt for the children, but I still could not concur with his reasoning, could not consent to it because I do not embody David's experiences. As human beings our realities diverged. He responded to the circumstances of his then being-in-the-world. The absolute reality of the concentration camp's present, in which the past is an illusion, and the future unimaginable, requires a normative realignment from both writer and reader. In order to textually live with and understand him, I had to suspend my moral imperatives and simply accept him as he was – as David.

For scholars able to treat the diary as pure historical text, a number of David's narrative threads deserve further research and analysis. Although Sherbakova (2005, 103-116) has illuminated significant deviations between men's and women's responses to the Gulag, and my Dutch-Indonesian Japanese concentration camp life segments underline Sherbakova's findings (Beaulieu 2009, 185-194), David's observations regarding women's sensuality in the camps, and men's lack thereof, are surely significant. His further discussions of gender divergence, particularly the comparisons he draws between his father and mother, suggest that men, who have lost their public face, space, and above all their personal agency, feel their utter despair differently than women. Moreover, he notes the good relations between women and their guards, recounts women staging rebellions en masse, and more generally reveals signifycant discrepancies in gender approaches to the perversion of power, civility dissolved by fear, and resistance to apathy.

David also describes moments of "great joy" in the camp, for instance during a period when a new commandant lifted severe restrictions, when food parcels arrived and letters were smuggled in from dear friends, and, significantly, of happiness provoked by humane acts from German overseers: "I like the camp a lot these days" (214). "I can't believe that Reinecke isn't a *mensch* in one way or another" (252). "[I]n the evening a soccer match, in which Reinecke joined, and one of the Jews bodychecked him so hard that he fell over a fence" (214). And the following:

> [B]ut for me there was great joy in something I'll describe… [the Unterscharführer said] Gentlemen! I want to impart a small item to you… I'll allow you to visit your womenfolk this afternoon… from two to five… And he: Did you understand: three full hours from two until five?... The man was a bit moved himself… And took so much pleasure in telling us that he almost didn't want to let us go… After dismissal Susskind reached for his hand in a formal way and kept on shaking it for a long time… Let me put it this way: this has somewhat restored my faith in humanity. (135)

Indeed, David never expresses hatred for the Reich's men in uniform, although contempt, derision, and sheer disbelief are certainly evident.

The prisoners' interpretation of the Unterscharführer's announcement as a sign of his benevolence, as generosity, is rooted in disjunction, the complete loss of sense making practices, the result of a structure designed to systematically break down intentionality and agency in each individual (White 1998, 174). This is true perversion; women and men should never have been separated, should never have been in the camps in the first place, since their very presence there was a travesty. For these prisoners the situation has become normalized, the disjunctive is the real and letting spouses see each other, giving children access to their parents, becomes an act of humanity. When people are methodically exposed to techniques calculated to break down their (past) reality, complete psychological disorientation is the result. In Vught – and the reader of the diary will engage David's discourse on German efficiency, including the running of camps – the abnormal has become logical, rational, and in this instance, benevolent.

The diary of David Koker has a great deal to teach us. This young man dissected the world around him and himself with scrupulous care. The fact that I experienced hostility to parts of his narrative renders the work potentially invaluable; it is not a careful presentation of self, but a remorseless evaluation of his being in his disjointed world and of the others who surround him. Attention to detail and careful historical reconciliation characterize the information with which the editors have enhanced the manuscript, and ensures that At the Edge of the Abyss will stand both as testimony and as a valuable historical document of an almost inconceivable period in our joint history. The diary will demand your involvement. It is not possible to lightly skim the surface of this text. It will leave you shaken and it may leave you traumatized. All the better. As one of my interviewees said to me when she recalled her life in a Japanese prison camp: "If I could live it, you can hear it" (Beaulieu 2009, 342).

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About the reviewer

Hendrika Beaulieu-Boon was born in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, immigrating to Canada with her parents in 1957. She completed her undergraduate degree in Anthropology at the University of Lethbridge in 1993. Her M.A. thesis, *Gender and Discourse on Anthro-L: An Anthropological Analysis of an Internet Bulletin Board*, focused on textual constructions of self during the early days of cyber-space communication, paying particular attention to gender and discourse. Upon receipt of a substantial SSHRC award from the Government of Canada, she commenced oral history research at the Ph.D. level into colonial relations, focusing on Dutch-Indonesian interaction during the last Colonial regime. Personal circumstances dictated a hiatus from this study and she commenced her full time teaching career at the University of Lethbridge in 2001 where she taught in the Departments of Anthropology and Modern Languages. She received her Ph.D. from Leiden University in the Netherlands in 2009. In 2004 she received a major five year CURA grant comprising both ethnographic and archeological research and moved to a position in the Department of Native American Studies at the University of Lethbridge in 2005.