

GALLERY גלריה

Women historians who are guardians of Shoah memory

Rokhl Oyerbakh and Deborah Lipstadt testify to the Jewish life destroyed in the war and challenge Holocaust denial

Rokhl Kafriksen

In April 1946, a memorial was held in the Polish capital marking the third anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The only woman to appear on the program that night was Rokhl Oyerbakh, one of three surviving members of the Warsaw Ghetto's Oyng Shabes collective.

Directed by historian Emanuel Ringelblum, Oyng Shabes created an underground archive of Polish Jewish life — the largest, most extensive of several archival projects active in the ghettos of World War II. They collected historical accounts of Warsaw Jewish life, pre- and postwar, as well as diaries, photographs and all manner of ephemera — even candy wrappers and tram tickets.

During her time in the ghetto, Oyerbakh was a prolific member of the collective, while also acting as director of the ghetto's soup kitchen under the auspices of the Aleynhilf (the ghetto self-help organization).

After decades of relative obscurity, the Oyng Shabes story is being told in an upcoming documentary, "Who Will Write Our History?," based on Samuel Kassow's monumental work of the same name.

In the words of Kassow, "To write was to resist, if only to bring the killers to justice." For Oyerbakh, personal survival was explicitly tied to the survival of the Oyng Shabes archive.

During the great deportation to Treblinka in 1942, upon handing over part of the archive for burial (in the hope of protecting the collection from the Nazis), Oyerbakh wrote, "I want to stay alive. I am ready to kiss the boots of the worst scoundrel just to be able to see the moment of revenge. REVENGE REVENGE remember."

While in the ghetto, Oyerbakh escaped deportation and other close calls, finding a job in a factory in late 1942, then escaping to the Aryan side in early 1943. Having survived, she did not waste one minute in her quest for justice — through dogged research, writing and recording. At the end of 1945, she



Jews being led out of the Warsaw Ghetto following the 1943 uprising.

went to Treblinka to gather information on Nazi war crimes as a member of an official Polish fact-finding group.

Oyerbakh cried out, 'There is a national treasure under the ruins. We cannot rest until we dig up the archive. I will not rest.'

When she moved to Israel in 1950, she joined Yad Vashem as the founder and director of the Department for the Collection of Witness Testimony. And her innovative approach to collecting eyewitness testimony would play a crucial role in the prosecution of Adolf Eichmann.

Sacred task

But at that April 1946 memorial evening in Warsaw, not everyone yet understood the role of witness testimony or the urgency of recovering the treasures buried by Ringelblum and his associates. Attendee Mendel Mann

recalled, "With a stubbornness that deeply affected me, [Oyerbakh] ... cried out, 'There is a national treasure under the ruins.... We cannot rest until we dig up the archive.... I will not rest, and I will not let you rest. We must rescue the Ringelblum Archive.'"

Oyerbakh implored the crowd to get to work on this sacred task, but, as Mann recalled, she received a "cool reception." Despite the indifference of the audience that night, the search finally began in the summer of 1946, and the first Ringelblum cache was found soon afterward.

Almost exactly 50 years later, the historicity of the Holocaust would be on trial, quite literally. On September 5, 1996, U.S. historian Deborah Lipstadt was sued in a British court by pseudo-historian David Irving, who accused Lipstadt of libel for characterizing him as a Holocaust denier.

Oyerbakh and Lipstadt — one a writer and public intellectual of the inter-war, European mold; the other an American born and trained historian — both found themselves at historic turning points. By dint of circumstance, talent and personal

force of will, both rose to the task as guardians of memory, speaking, each in her own way, for the murdered.

The two historians also represent the two fronts of memory work left to postwar Jewry: one facing the outside world, refuting those who would deny the murder of European Jewry; the other facing inward, shaping how Jews would understand what had been destroyed, and how.

For the Oyng Shabes members, history was to be "an antidote to a memory of a catastrophe which, however well intentioned, would subsume what had been into what had been destroyed."

Lipstadt's battle with David Irving made front-page news around the world, while

Oyerbakh's story is little known outside those who study Polish Jewry or the history of the Holocaust.

"Denial," a movie based on Lipstadt's courtroom battle with Irving, will be released in the United States later this month. Rachel Weisz plays Lipstadt, while Timothy Spall plays Irving.

The return of Holocaust denial

Both films are occasions for celebration: The triumph of the historical record in court; and vindication for a woman who spent her whole life reconstructing what was nearly obliterated. Yet, there are other, more sober observations to be made.



Rachel Weisz, left, and Deborah E. Lipstadt. Fred Thornhill/Reuters

For one thing, despite having its made-for-Hollywood day in court, Holocaust denial is very much alive and well, and within a depressingly wide spectrum of political affiliations and demographics. Conspiracy theorists, the fringes of the extreme left and right, and even among ordinary people old enough to have lived through WWII as teenagers — and at the very pinnacle of American politics.

Donald Trump's foreign policy adviser, Joseph Schmitz, has come under fire for downplaying the extent of the Final Solution: he is alleged to have opined that "the ovens were too small to kill 6 million Jews." Anti-Trump journalists have been bombarded with both Holocaust denials and parodies, often grotesque. Amaju Baraka, the Green Party's nominee for vice president, has a very public history of working with a well-known Holocaust denier, Kevin Barrett.

Unfortunately, it seems, Holocaust denial — and anti-Semitism more broadly — won't be defeated either by the material evidence of the Oyng Shabes archive, direct survivor testimony nor a one-time legal battle.

The work of history is not a monument erected once and admired ever after, but an infrastructure tended from the inside and out, over generations, a task inevitably shaped by those who take up the work.

How women experienced the Holocaust

And while Lipstadt and Oyerbakh stand as giants, they are also exceptions. For as long as historians have been studying the Holocaust, that work has been dominated and shaped by men.

Consider: The first historical conference focusing on the experience of women in the Holocaust only took place in 1983. And the first book on the subject, "Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust," appeared in 1993.

Dr. Rochelle Saidel, the founder and director of the Remember the Women Institute, has spent decades studying the way gender shaped the Jewish wartime experience.

She is also quite open about how her research has been met with skepticism by male academics. For example, she recalls being at

a conference where she was heckled by a male historian when she mentioned rape as an aspect of sexualized violence during the war. And that was in 2006!

Indeed, rape and sexual abuse of concentration-camp prisoners has been a taboo subject in the field. Yad Vashem didn't index rape in survivor testimonies, while the Steven Spielberg-funded Shoah Foundation interviewees were instructed not to ask survivors about such things. The lack of collected evidence creates a self-reinforcing impression that sexual abuse didn't happen. It is only those with that rare force of will who are able to change the way we write our history.

A full accounting of the female experience of the Holocaust is only now beginning to be written. The third cache of Oyng Shabes documents has never been found. Ninety-nine percent of Oyerbakh's enormous body of work has never been translated into English. There is still tremendous historiographical work to be done.

Historian Samuel Kassow notes that the "Oyng Shabes commitment to comprehensive documentation went hand-in-hand with another important commitment: to postwar justice."

We must not lose sight of the ways that our understanding of history is incomplete, yet still subject to distortion and denial — and what is at stake in pursuing that work.

The writer is the author of "A Brokhe" ("A Blessing"), a Yiddish-English gangster-gloss romance in three acts. Her writing on Yiddish and contemporary Jewish life has been widely published. Follow her on Twitter: @Rokhik

Israeli comic goes to N.Y., keeps his accent, gets a shot on 'Sesame Street' — in silent role

Haim Handwerker

Sometimes playing a silly character with a funny name can give a novice actor's career a big boost. Just ask Israeli comic and actor Daniel Koren, who recently was asked to become part of the Noodle family on the classic children's show "Sesame Street." Koren will play the brother of Mr. Noodle (played by none other than Bill Irwin) and the friend of one of the show's beloved main characters, Elmo. Koren has shot nine episodes so far; they will air early next year on HBO, which bought the rights to "Sesame Street" last year.

I first became aware of Koren when he performed in one of the "Little Cinema" events run by Israeli Jay (Asaf) Rinsky at House of Yes, the Brooklyn club that blends theater and circus. Rinsky, a DJ, takes segments of movies and interweaves them with live performances, be it music, dance, circus acts or something else. Very cool. Rinsky invited Koren to be part of the screening of "Man on the Moon" starring Jim Carrey, about the bizarre life of comedian Andy Kaufman. Rinsky saw something in Koren that reminded him of Kaufman. Koren was hilarious that evening. Unfortunately I missed another recent performance of his at Joe's Pub at the New York Public Theater.

Koren has already developed a following on YouTube. About once a month he produces a video clip and posts it. One of the best is "Walking Contest," a wry take on communication with passersby in the street. The YouTube clips are also what got him the part on Sesame Street. "I didn't do any audition," he says. "Somebody who's connected to the production saw my YouTube clips. They emailed me, and the rest is history."

And his YouTube clips have brought him other work as well. "In my videos I combine humor with things that happen to us in daily life. Maybe there's something



Koren Haim Handwerker

neurotic about them," says Koren. "In real life, I'm not like that, or maybe I kind of am. The videos that I post on YouTube lead to jobs that bring in real money. That's how I was asked to write the music for a Web series called 'The Watch' and now I'm also supposed to direct a commercial for Mentos."

Koren, 32, has lived in America for 10 years now — two years in Boston and eight in New York. He hails from Rishon Letzion and trained as a pianist. His parents both taught music and were the directors of a music school. He studied at the Rubin Academy of Music and then at the Rimon School of Music. From there he went

'There are Israeli actors who work hard to get rid of their accent, but they still get cast as Arab terrorists.'

to Boston to continue his music studies. During that time, he began playing as an accompanist at a dance studio. "I played happily for a few years. When I came to New York, I also played for the dancers at Julliard and at NYU and other places. Over time I developed a musical show that was comical too, and that's how I first really got into comedy. I became an undeclared actor-comedian." Today he is married and lives in Williamsburg in Brooklyn. He is not raising children, but is raising vegetables in his garden, he says.



Sesame Street character Elmo exits New York subway. Reuters

Like the rest of the Noodle clan on "Sesame Street," Koren will not speak, and communicate only through pantomime. "The Noodles are very expressive but they don't talk," he says. "They make mistakes and fix them with Elmo's help." Actually, it's a shame viewers won't get to hear his voice. Unlike most of the Israeli actors who come to Hollywood, Koren makes no effort to conceal his thick Israeli accent. He even seems to relish putting it center-stage.

Is that your real accent in English?

"Absolutely. I'm so far from being able to speak English with a British or American accent that I decided not to fight my Israeli accent and include it in the character I created. I knew I had no chance to change my accent, so I took this lemon and made chocolate out of it. There are Israeli actors who work hard to get rid of their accent, but in the end they still get cast as Arab terrorists."

Koren may get a chance to display his unmistakable Israeli accent in the not too distant future. "I pitched a series to Comedy Central where I played the lead speaking role, but it hasn't been put on the air. I sold a proposal for another series to the Starz network, where I also play the lead and speak in my Israeli accent, and they haven't said no yet." For Hebrew-speakers, Ko-

ren has another series of YouTube clips called "Haverim Mamash" ("Real Friends"), which has become a cult hit. It features three characters all played by Koren. One recurring theme has to do with his adjustment to living in America. Take a peek at the clip entitled Ma Haketa im Ha'amrikaim ("What is it with Americans?") and you'll understand. Another clip called "Do'ar Zevel" ("Junk

Mail") offers an unusual view of Israeli high-tech people. Some of the videos contain impressive musical segments. The videos help him maintain his connection with Israel, for one thing by working with Israeli actors, like Hani Furstenberg and Lanni Cohen. The videos also drew the attention of Israeli comic Guri Alfi, who tapped Koren to be his show's correspondent in New York. Koren reports with his typical humor on goings-on in the Big Apple.

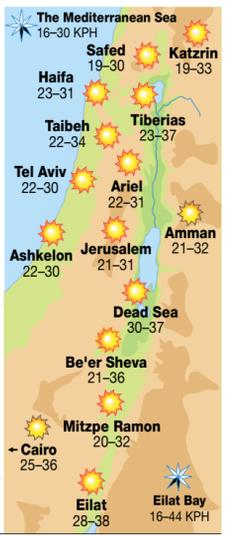
So far, Koren gained his biggest exposure when he took part in a sketch on Jimmy Kimmel's late-night show on ABC. He appeared alongside Scarlett Johansson and former "Saturday Night Live" star Fred Armisen. Quite an impressive achievement to act alongside such big names, but it isn't one of Koren's proudest moments. He smiles bashfully and says it wasn't a very good bit. The sketch didn't work. Having seen the sketch, I'm afraid I have to agree with him there. The talents of all the performers, Koren included, were mostly wasted.

Weather

Getting hotter

Today's weather will be hot and dry, particularly in the hills and the center. Tomorrow will be even hotter, with shavur conditions in the center and south. The heat will break on Thursday, bringing comfortable conditions to most parts of the country. The cooling will continue on Friday, with light rain possible in the north and center.

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
06:26	06:26	18:39
Air pollution index: 19.9-16		
low ● medium ● high ● very high ●		
Jerusalem	Tel Aviv	Haifa
Be'er Sheva	Karmiel	Afula
Mod'in		
pollution forecast for this morning: low-medium		



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BOLERO & BALLET FOR LIFE

It's a climax that tends to leave the audience in an euphoric state of tension (Lipstadt during New York Times)

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