

**Rosen, Ilana. *Sister in Sorrow: Life Histories of Female Holocaust Survivors from Hungary*. Translated and edited by Sandy Bloom. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008. 269 pp.**

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Ilana Rosen's book sets forth oral testimonies of 15 Holocaust survivors, 13 women and 2 husbands. All the interviewees have a common cultural background as Hungarian-Jewish families of varying levels of religiosity and loyalty – or attachment - to Hungarian culture. The definition Hungarian is also applied to interviewees from present-day neighboring countries, such as Romania, if they associated themselves with the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and perceived themselves as belonging to Hungarian Jewry. In the time of the interviews, recorded between 1989 and 1991, six narrators lived in Hungary or in Romania and the other nine had immigrated to Israel. This choice of informants limited the study to the exploration of Hungarian Holocaust survivors in Hungary and Israel, leaving out Hungarian Jews who after World War II immigrated to other Western countries.

The author's prolonged immersion into researching narratives about the tragic events of the Holocaust were initially triggered by her Ph.D. project, but later deeply inspired by a personal aspect, which for some time had been half-hidden from her. Born in Israel in the early 1960s to two Holocaust survivors from Hungary, Rosen was only superficially exposed to her parents' past, which was typical for the youngsters of her generation. This situation was influenced by three main factors: the parents' reluctance to darken their children's youth, the children's wish to escape this tragic knowledge, and the general atmosphere of silencing Holocaust experiences as non-heroic, which prevailed in Israeli society from the 1950s to the 1970s. The early death of Rosen's parents, as well as, her research turned the spotlight onto the family context. This is well elaborated in the book, starting with the author being named after two relatives called Ilona (Ilush), both of whom perished in Auschwitz, and ending with her interviewing in Hungary her own paternal aunt for the Ph.D. project.

The book has four chapters and an appendix, as well as a bibliography, and term, name, and place indexes.

In the first chapter, "Brainstorming about the life histories of women Holocaust survivors," Rosen addresses several main issues as a kind of introduction to her research. Starting with her personal story Rosen reflects on the interview situation, which she views as analogous to parent-child communication, with the interviewer as a child and the interviewees as parents (who in most cases and for many reasons never told their stories to their own children). She then proceeds to survey the studies of the female experience in the Holocaust, concluding that there is still much to explore. Finally she outlines the historical and cultural background of Hungarian Jewry and formulates the general characteristics of their Holocaust-dominated life histories. The combination of such factors as loyalty to the Hungarian state and culture, the shortness and intensity of Holocaust, which lasted for a year and two months for most Hungarian Jews, and half that time for the Jews of Budapest, and the lack of Jewish leadership - all led to reliance on survival strategies, which were typical in the prewar period, but not helpful in the harsh new situation. Typically the Jews continued to cooperate with the authorities,

hoping that decency, productivity, and bribery would save them from death. Accordingly, their participation in underground activity and movements was only minimal. This reflected their long standing loyalty to Hungarian society and culture, despite their hardship at that time. The traits and atmosphere of the narration stem from the long silencing of the traumatic Holocaust experiences in both Israel and Hungary, in the former as non-heroic and in the latter due to political oppression of groups and their claims. But in Israel, by the time of the interviews the attitude to these stories had already changed, which cannot be said about Hungary. Its brevity notwithstanding the Holocaust period appears to be central in the informants' life histories and influences their narratives about their previous and subsequent life stages as well. Their discourse often fluctuates between telling and hiding, between hinting and silencing the unspeakable. Although Rosen addresses the narratives from various viewpoints, she consciously chooses the term "life histories" among several others (e.g., life story, life narrative, personal history, life writing), stressing the bonds between story and history, and the individual and society.

The second chapter, "Mother-daughter discourse: a literary-psychoanalytical analyses of five life histories," centers on the stories of mothers or daughters, or the dialogue between them. The mother-daughter relationships are presented in three different versions. The first version is an actual dialogue of two informants, a mother and a daughter. The second reflects relations between the woman and the child within her, while the third alludes to the mother figure as carried by the daughter in her mature years. Compared with the mothers the father figure and image are only minimally present. Focusing on the Holocaust narratives, Rosen redefines the concept of trauma, which in this case differs from accepted definitions. In the Holocaust it affected masses of people, was long-term, and entailed countless repetitions of atrocities. As a result, normalizing and routinizing these recurring events became a survival strategy. Years after the Holocaust and its silencing, trauma may be traced in the narratives mostly through "symptoms" like numbness, amnesia, obsessive repetitions with significant variations, and expression of guilt feelings. Rosen is sensitive to ethical questions and refrains from being invasive, especially regarding sexual or other disturbing issues.

The third chapter is entitled "The Holocaust experiences of its listeners and readers: a phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis of ten life histories." It analyses narratives that unlike the relatively coherent stories discussed in the previous chapter are somewhat obscure because of various linguistic, psychological and ideological factors. Consequently, their understanding relies heavily on interpretation techniques, and in extreme cases it leads to the revelation of so-called "ghost chapters" (Umberto Eco's term), which are sensed but not rendered. Both the reader and the listener, who in this case is Rosen herself, become actively involved in this process of deciphering, or rather co-creating the text. Special attention is given to the use of various languages in the process of narration and to the tension between revealing and concealing events and emotions. Narrators talk in Hungarian, Hebrew, German, and Yiddish, and the use of each of them has different functions. Thus German is often used only in the quotation of direct speech – orders and swearwords - of the Nazi guards; whereas meager immigrant Hebrew may be preferred to native Hungarian in the wish to distance oneself from the traumatic past, as a reaction to the alienation of Hungarians to the Jewish sufferers, or to exemplify one's absorption into Israel. In any case the use of languages and their

combination is never neutral but the mixture becomes a language in itself (in her recent study *Soul of Saul* (2011) Rosen creates a more inclusive theory of this understanding). The deciphering of the narratives likewise requires the knowledge of the historical and cultural context, namely, the real meanings of formulaic euphemisms (e.g., “remained there” and “never returned” instead of “perished etc.”). The interviewees are simultaneously willing and unwilling to tell their stories, which evoke feelings of guilt and hint at the existence of metaphoric “graves” or “secret chambers,” but also partly relieve them of the psychological burden of keeping it all to themselves.

In the short concluding fourth chapter “A journey without conclusion” one of these “secret chambers” is presented. This is the silenced experience of a narrator who dragged the dead bodies by their ankles to the collection spot in return for some extra food. In her account the narrator herself omitted this fact and in general was extremely terse, merely hinting that not everything could be told; but another narrator, her distant relative, told it in her own interview. According to Rosen, this instance illustrates that the analyses of Holocaust life histories reveals the existence of various truths instead of one, and that in sum this is an unfathomable narrative.

Differently from the use of the narratives in the theoretical chapters, where only fragments are presented and analyzed, the appendix contains all the interviews in full, giving the readers the rare opportunity to read them uninterrupted and to compare their own understanding with that of the author.

To my mind, Ilana Rosen’s book is an important contribution to Hungarian studies. It presents the voice of the victimized and long-silenced Jewish Holocaust survivors, who, although perceived by Hungarians as the *Other*, were in their own eyes Hungarians of Jewish faith, loyal to the Hungarian state, and proud of their common history. The book will definitely attract also specialists in gender studies as it focuses on gendered experiences and gendered survival strategies such as creating surrogate families and the use of caretaking skills. In short, it presents *herstory* of the Holocaust in Hungary. This book is also important for ethnologists and folklorists working in their own communities, as it offers deep insights into the practice and ethics of fieldwork. Last but not the least, it is useful to sociolinguists and to folk linguists as it elaborates the topic of language awareness and language symbolism.

### **Works Cited**

Rosen, Ilana. 2011. *Soul of Saul: the Life, Narrative and Proverbs of a Transylvanian-Israeli Grandfather*. Burlington: The U of Vermont, Proverbium.