

# Reviews

**VATICAN DIPLOMACY AND THE JEWS  
DURING THE HOLOCAUST, 1939-43**  
by John F. Morley  
(KTAV Publishing House, 327 pp., \$20.00)

**BY WORDS ALONE:  
THE HOLOCAUST IN LITERATURE**  
by Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi  
(University of Chicago Press, 262 pp., \$15.00)

Gordon C. Zahn

Suddenly, almost twenty years after Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy*, we have a scholarly treatise confirming many of his controversial charges. Using official Vatican sources, Father Morley reaches the troubling conclusion, first, that the papal nuncios assigned to the affected countries showed little or no consistent humanitarian concern about the sufferings of the Jews. To some extent, he suggests, this reflected a comparable lack of concern, despite constant assurances to the contrary, on the part of Cardinal Maglione, Vatican secretary of state. "At best," Morley concludes, "his feelings toward them were indifferent; at worst, they were hostile." Finally, when the focus is shifted to Pius XII himself, the evidence reveals that his total commitment to diplomacy as the means for dealing with the problem imposed such strictures upon its operation that it became "a mockery of its claims that it was an ideal form of diplomacy dedicated to justice, brotherhood, and other similarly exalted goals, when in practice it made little attempt to work toward any of them."

These admittedly severe judgments are found in Morley's final chapter of conclusions. Before reaching that point, he had conducted a painstakingly thorough review of the documentary evidence pertaining to the Vatican's relationships with the countries (Rumania, France, Slovakia, Germany, Poland, Croatia, and Italy) which, willingly or unwillingly, fell under Nazi domination and became accomplices in the infamous Final Solution. A chapter is devoted to each in turn, with evaluation and interpretation held to a minimum. Instead, the author provides a basically chronological recapitulation of actions taken by the governments involved and the Vatican's formal responses to those actions. In terms of

style this threatens at times to reduce the book to little more than an organization of Morley's research notes and raw data. However, in terms of impact upon the reader this approach, almost removing the researcher and his point of view from the account, adds to the force of the grim evidence itself.

The almost studied use of understatement adds to this effect. One illustration is the detailed step-by-step recital of the arrest and deportation of Roman Jews (an event used by Hochhuth to great effect) that is balanced against a description of Vatican efforts to hide and care for Jews in religious houses

and institutions. Morley's judgment, all the more shocking for its restraint, is: "These efforts, no doubt, saved thousands of Jews. Yet on the other hand, the Vatican reaction to the deportation of 1,007 Jews from the Roman ghetto was so minimal as to be disappointing and, possibly, shameful."

A more intrusively evaluative note would have weakened the total effect. The exchanges of diplomatic reports and instructions are embarrassment enough, even when their quite laudable purpose is to counter or delay the deportations. That the Church's concern was limited mainly to *baptized* Jews is already a matter of historical record, and, given the extreme circumstances, one can see logical justification for giving priority of concern to "one's own." What makes this concentration of Church interest morally suspect, however, are the occasional but unmistakable overtones of anti-Semitism in some of the diplomatic exchanges cited by Morley. So, too, the strategy of emphasizing opposition to laws and legal definitions that challenged Church prerogatives was undoubtedly prudentially sound; in hindsight, however, one is left with the impression of

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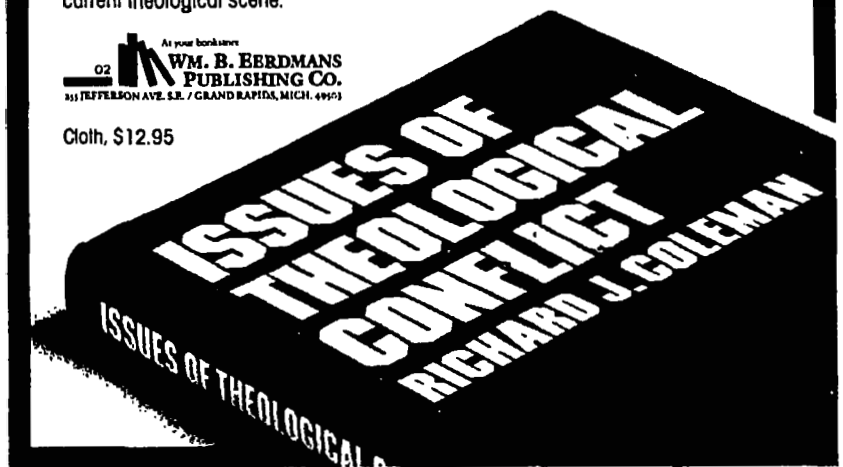
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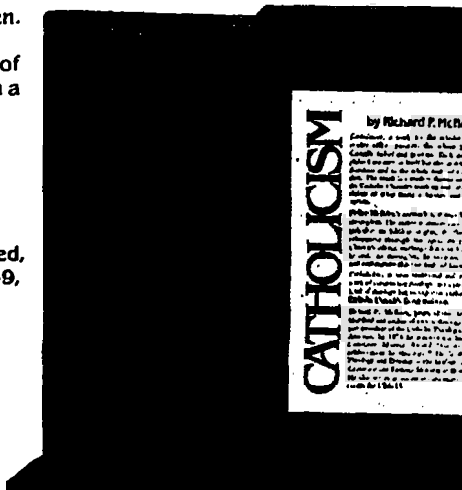
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a self-serving indifference to the broader human dimensions of the crimes those same laws were designed to facilitate. One even encounters implications—and Morley does take pains to criticize this—that some churchmen went so far as to find subtle hints of some divine design in a situation that was forcing so many Jews to turn to the Church and seek baptism.

The greatest display of official papal indignation was provoked by the rumor that young Jewish girls, some of them baptized, were destined to be shipped as prostitutes to the war zone. Otherwise the pope's policy was described as one of "prudent delay and enlightened reserve." Maglione even assured the German consul: "The Holy See would not want to be put into the necessity of uttering a word of disapproval." No line in Hochhuth's play quite matches that; yet, since no condemnatory word was uttered, it serves as a capsule summary of Vatican diplomacy faced with the moral challenge of the Holocaust.

This moral challenge is about the only thing the Morley and Ezrahi volumes have in common. Where Morley's is the historian's restrained and understated probing of documents deal-

ing with a carefully delimited problem, Ezrahi's task is that of literary criticism, pursuing themes and perspectives in the works of the creative imagination. To that task she brings her own spiritual and emotional involvement. This is not to say the result is any less scholarly, though it is certainly more interpretive and suffers at times from the unavoidably abstract character of her analysis and interpretation. Where Morley carefully avoids imposing a personal interpretation on the diplomatic documents on which his study is based, Ezrahi selects particular fragments of novels and poetry to illustrate her themes, making liberal use of italics to give special emphasis to what she considers the more significant "messages" conveyed by those fragments. Many of the authors discussed are familiar: Wiesel, Schwarz-Bart, Sachs, Kosinski, Bellows, and—the obvious link to the Morley book—Hochhuth. Others were previously unknown to this reader, and some of them clearly demand closer attention.

Ezrahi's first chapter provides an excellent theoretical orientation to documentation as an art form, and develops a pattern of analysis based essentially

upon the differing distance in time and remoteness in experience between the Holocaust and the various authors' creative responses to it. At the first level we have what she calls "concentrationary realism," a term that even she admits is dreadful. This is literature produced under the pressure of actual experience in the doomed ghettos and concentration camps, "a form of fiction which places the exposed individual at its center and traces the degrees of concentrationary reality, the erosive effects of brutal reality on the autonomy and integrity of the self." Quite apart from consideration of moral literary standards—though these works of "concentrationary realism" meet these too—the very fact that such creative activity was possible in such a setting and at such a time must be taken as a tribute to the liberating power of the human intellect and spirit.

The other categories, obviously, do not meet this immediacy of experience. The "survivors" shared that experience, but, by living through it and re-creating the experience after the fact, speak from a different perspective. And that perspective may carry added dimensions: for some, overtones of guilt simply for having survived; for others, a reticence even to *seem* to be "exploiting" those who did not survive; for still others, a need to give lasting testimony to the fact that those who did not survive had existed and, in this way, preserve some record of them, intangible though it might be. Two succeeding chapters are devoted to the Holocaust as "Jewish tragedy." The first deals with the literature of lamentation, the attempt, usually conscious, to memorialize and mourn the Jewish people as collective victim. The second is a more spiritual, even mystical, presentation of the Holocaust in the context of the Covenant and a discussion of its symbolic implications for the whole of Jewish history. The final two analytical chapters, "The Holocaust Mythologized" and "History Imagined," discuss works that are at the furthest remove from the immediacy of actual experience. The latter chapter deals with the Holocaust and its implications in American literature.

Alfred Kazin in his Foreword laments that "Our age will be remembered less for its art than for its technology. And one of the most terrible mementos of our technology will always be Hitler's factories of death."

One can point to other such mem-  
 entos—the instant Auschwitz of nuclear  
 destruction past and the promise of  
 even greater genocidal potential for the  
 future—but one can still see in the  
 Holocaust the clearest evidence of hu-  
 mankind's failure to meet the moral  
 and spiritual challenge our technologi-  
 cal and scientific commitments pre-  
 sent. As such, it deserves the contin-  
 uing attention it has received as one of  
 the truly pivotal events of our times.  
 Both of these books contribute signifi-  
 cantly to the fuller awareness we must  
 achieve if the lessons of the Holocaust  
 are to be learned. Today it is the human  
 race, not just one of its unfortunate seg-  
 ments, that is threatened with extinc-  
 tion. [WV]

**THE DRAGON'S VILLAGE**

by Yuan-tsung Chen

(Pantheon Books, x + 285 pp., \$10.00)

Miriam London

In our unjust times only marketers of  
 drugs or worldly goods are held ac-  
 countable for truth in advertising; lit-  
 erateurs enjoy literary immunity.  
 Thus, in his blurb for *The Dragon's Vil-  
 lage*, Harrison Salisbury does not shrink  
 from likening this meager, disingenu-  
 ous autobiographical tale to Sholok-  
 hov's full-blooded masterpiece *The  
 Quiet Don*. If one must really seek  
 Yuan-tsung Chen's literary twin on the  
 Soviet scene, it would more likely be a  
 Vera Panova, one of those modestly tal-  
 ented but Party-broken scribes who sur-  
 vived and published in Stalin's time  
 and are now quietly obsolescent. For  
 the curious fact is that, although Yuan-  
 tsung Chen left her native China in  
 1972 and evidently wrote her book in  
 our permissive country, *The Dragon's  
 Village* is essentially a minor exercise in  
 the genre of socialist realism.

As a Russian proverb has it: "In the  
 absence of fish, even a crab is a fish."  
 Against the dead backdrop of untruth,  
 the verisimilitude that Soviet socialist-  
 realist writers permitted themselves,  
 the faint play allowed to human way-  
 wardness and vulnerability, seemed al-  
 most true, almost live, almost real.  
 There were even some people in those  
 days who managed to mistake this poor  
 literary fare for a feast. Finally, an hon-  
 est man dared to rend the backdrop and  
 bare the windows on the great house of

**"The great virtue and service of  
 Sidra Ezrahi's *By Words Alone***

is that more than any other book I know on this  
 literature, it helps us to see the terrible events that  
 formed it. Although her book is essentially a literary  
 history, and displays the kind of quiet judgment that  
 literary history requires, Mrs. Ezrahi makes us see  
 the Holocaust itself as inevitably more real, urgent,  
 terrible, than the writing that came out of it. That  
 is as it should be. In the history of Jewish literature  
 generally, the creation comes before the word and  
 transcends it... To be a Jew is to know that words  
 strive after the reality but can never adequately  
 capture the human situation."

—From the Foreword by Alfred Kazin

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**Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi**

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