

People just love dead Jews

by Phyllis Chesler



I am, quite simply, blown away by Dara Horn's impeccable and original research, relentless courage, and sheer eloquence as contained in her latest book, [*The New Anti-Semitism*](#) and have proudly been seen as a traitor in certain circles ever since I published it in 2003. In lectures, I'd ventured the idea that Jewish deaths have long been worshipped as "redemptive" by Christians—but, like Horn, I was also uneasy by the unsettling reverence that *Jewish* people manifested when they visited Holocaust exhibits.

In 2006, I published "[Cynthia Ozick](#) wrote about what this meant in the 1990s in the pages of *The New Yorker*."

Horn dares to imagine what Anne Frank might have written had she not been murdered by the Dutch who turned her over to the Nazis. Horn pens an imagined Obituary for Frank, the "noted Dutch novelist and essayist, (who) died this past Wednesday...She was 92."

Horn also ponders the nature of Holocaust films and novels and finds much, actually everything, lacking. The focus on the exceptional Christian who "saved" a small number of Jews—"small," because so many millions more were murdered; the focus on, if not a happy ending, then on an ending that is somehow "uplifting" or is, at least, an "ending."

I was among the minority who did not especially love *Schindler's List* for this very reason.

According to Horn, stories in Yiddish and Hebrew, including in the Tanach, are often far from uplifting and have no neat ending in sight—and in terms of Jewish history, the

persecution, the exile, the murders continue decade after decade, century after century.

Even stories adapted into Broadway plays and musicals, such as Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*, repackaged as the beloved *Fiddler on the Roof*, do not tell us the truth. The omitted details from the book include "Tevye's wife, Golde, dropping dead; Tevye's son-in-law Motl dropping dead; and Tevye's daughter Shprintze drowning herself, none of which would have played well on Broadway."

Horn introduces us—or me, at least, to the kind of work that tells about "the horrors of Jewish history" more accurately. She introduces me to Chava Rosenfarb, whose trilogy, *The Tree of Life*, written in Yiddish, "demonstrates a more accurate way to write fiction about atrocity." According to Horn, Rosenfarb whitewashes nobody, not the Jews, not the Nazis.

"Despite our own culture's saturation in violent imagery, *The Tree of Life* is extremely difficult to read. There is no ruminating about God here, no contrived conversations with Nazis that show their humanity, nor even any brave rebellion—at least not until the very end. Instead there is confusion, starvation, denial, and sheer sadistic horror... Yet *The Tree of Life* is not a work of testimony but a work of art."

When Horn addresses Varian Fry and his rescue of Europe's glitteratti, she simply stunned me. This is a must-read essay.

In the mid-1930s, in Berlin, Fry "witnessed how a modern civilized country executes a pogrom... storm troopers engineered a riot... on one of the city's most expensive and fashionable streets." Jews were dragged out of their cars and beaten, spat upon, kicked; some later died the next day. Fry viewed it as an organized "spectacle." He wrote:

"Old men and young men, boys, Storm Troopers, police, young

girls of the domestic servant type, well-bred women, some even in the forties and over—all seemed to be having a good time... a chant would be raised... the best Jew is a dead Jew.”

Fry was horrified. He instinctively knew what he had seen and what it meant.

When given the opportunity, Fry almost single-handedly rescued the best of secular European culture. He rescued Hannah Arendt, Marcel Duchamp, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Claude Levi-Strauss, Franz Werfel, Mrs. Alma Mahler (married to Werfel at the time), Lion Feuchtwanger, and Andre Breton, to name only a few.

He risked his life, his health, his marriage in order to do so—and yet, guess what? Horn discovers that none of these Greats ever “thanked” him in terms of ever mentioning him in their works or in interviews about how they got out, or in terms of responding to his many letters. Some refused to donate their art work to a Memorial for the group that he had headed: The Emergency Rescue Committee.

Deftly, compassionately, Horn delves into the psychology of both the rescuer and the rescued.

Let us remember that few tried to save European Jewish culture, those who actually “studied righteousness. For them, there were no Varian Frys.”

Thank you Dara Horn. Please carry on. Never stop.

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