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Journey through the Night. Jakob Littner's Holocaust Memoir

translated and edited by Nathan Gruebler, with a foreword by Reinhard Zachau.

New York & London: Continuum, 130 pp.

Jakob Littner's *Journey Through the Night* is a powerful eyewitness account of individual Holocaust survival with an intriguing publishing history. Littner, having returned to his hometown of Munich after the war and composed his harrowing memoir, decided to look for a professional writer to edit and publish the story. In 1948 the non-Jewish novelist Wolfgang Koeppen brought out a shortened, stylistically polished version with some additions of his own under Littner's name but without any references to the author's real-life identity. The book sold only several hundred copies, there being no sizable non-Jewish interest in Holocaust survival in Germany. In 1950 Littner died in New York. In 1992 Koeppen reissued the book, claiming with the backing of his publisher Suhrkamp that it was a "novel" of his own creation and, in order to explain the book's unusual realism, admitting that its starting point had been a survivor's oral account of names and dates from his own life story, transmitted to Koeppen by a third party. By referring in a new retrospective preface to the survivor merely as a "man escaped from a German hell," a "maltreated person," a Jew who had commissioned him (Koeppen) to write the story of his survival, Koeppen implied that the 1948 authorial designation "Jakob Littner" had been his pseudonym. Because the public believed that the book was authored by a well-established writer, 20,000 (mostly paperback) copies were sold. Some critics expressed skepticism about Koeppen's authorship claim and dug up information about a real Littner from Munich's pre-war and post-war resident registration rolls. Many others swallowed the claim that the book was a fiction of Koeppen's own design and counted it among the most penetrating imaginings of Holocaust suffering by a non-Jewish German writer. *The New York Review* (7/16/92) conceded that the book was a major addition to non-Jewish Holocaust fiction despite its lack of literary merit.

The skeptics were proven right when three years ago Reinhard Zachau, a German literature scholar at the University of the South, located the 188 typed pages of Jakob Littner's original memoir. That memoir, as translated and revised by Nathan Gruebler, is the book under review here. It demonstrates that Koeppen even in 1948 had masked the unmistakably factual origin of the text by suppressing Littner's subtitle "A Document of Racial Hatred. An Account of My Experiences," his

dedication “to the memory of all those who perished,” and his guarantee of historical accuracy by reference to a number of non-Jewish eyewitnesses. Since the original was discovered, some critics continue to argue that Koeppen's authorship claim is legitimate since he fashioned it into a suspenseful, artistic work. The truth is that Littner never intended it to be art and that it can stand completely on its own as a factual report. Ironically, without Koeppen's ill-conceived 1992 “intervention” and its discovery after his death the memoir might never have been published or translated. These circumstances bring into focus some interesting issues concerning the relationship between facts and fiction.

The reported facts are mind-boggling and defy ordinary belief. Littner was an Austrian-Hungarian Jew with a Polish passport, a successful stamps dealer living in Munich, from which he was expelled by the Nazis. He moved to, and survived the war, in Zbaraz, a small town near Tarnopol on the eastern border of what for more than one hundred years had been the Austrian-Hungarian province of Galicia. Galicia had provided by far the largest portion of the total Jewish population of the former Austria-Hungary. The strong presence and “foreign” customs and demeanors of “eastern” (i. e. Galician) Jews in turn-of-the-century Vienna gave rise to the intense, corrosive Austrian anti-Semitism that shaped the adolescent Hitler. At the end of WW I (1918) Galicia had become part of Poland. In 1939 after the Hitler-Stalin-pact eastern Galicia became part of the Soviet Union and in 1941 part of German-occupied "General Government" Poland. The Nazi extermination of Jews in this region was carried out with ruthless efficiency by security and regular police and special SS forces under the command of Himmler's representative for eastern Galicia, the “Superior SS- and Police Chief” Katzmann. Katzmann was grateful to Himmler for allowing him to rise quickly within the security police at a young age and without much formal education -- he had been a carpenter by profession -- and he understood well that in Hitler's and Himmler's eyes the traditional image of the “Galician Jew” was the archetypal model of the dreaded “racially diseased” Jew (for some background see *Report of SS- and Police General Fritz Katzmann about the Killing of the Jews of Galicia*, ed. Tuviah Friedman [1993]). In a special “Fuehrer-order,” Hitler had declared the rendering of Galicia "free of Jews" a high priority. Katzmann felt compelled by ambition, duty, racial hatred, and an imminent new assignment to achieve this objective as early as June 1943. Of the approximately 530,000 Jews of eastern Galicia, only 2 percent survived Katzmann's efforts. Littner and his future wife Janina Korngold were among those few.

Littner's memoir first summarizes the three years between his expulsion from Munich to the

German attack on the Soviet Union, then gives a blow-by-blow account of his horrific experiences, a continuous flow of dates of so-called "Jews actions" (roundups), mass executions (with descriptions of the local burial sites), and deportations to the death camp Belzec. Littner gives exact names of victimized friends and neighbors as well as the circumstances of their deaths, the names of many of the Germans and their actions, and the names of Jewish collaborators. Throughout these events Littner kept a low profile and avoided any contact with the Germans. Although his native fluency could have tempted him to seek to influence them, from early on he understood their irreversible plans and tactical deceptions. He narrates the "unfolding events" with great compassion and yet an almost detached objectivity, made possible by his irrationally optimistic trust in God, a spiritual disregard for the mercilessly tightening noose. In one of the most moving parts of his story he relates how the Christian woman Christine Hintermayer, his former live-in friend and business partner in Munich, visited him in early 1943 in Zbaraz and then faithfully kept him supplied with money, food parcels, and rare stamps (to sell), all of which allowed him to survive in his paid-for hiding place, an earth bunker beneath a cellar, until the region's liberation by the Red Army in March of 1944.

Littner's original text must be counted among the earliest German-speaking testimonials by surviving victims about the locally administered slaughter of a town's whole Jewish population. Given the fact that for some time after the war the Nazi activities in eastern Galicia were overlooked by Western observers (a Nuremberg Military Tribunal focussed on the "Einsatzgruppen" mass killings in the Baltic, White Russia, and the Ukraine), the events related by Littner could have been known only to a participant, never to a "civilian" novelist in 1948. They became much better known in the next two decades (see "Zbaraz" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*). Two recent comprehensive studies (Thomas Sandkuehler, *"Endloesung" in Galizien* [1996]; Dieter Pohl, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien* [1997]), by utilizing Nazi documents and the hundreds of depositions amassed in the criminal prosecution of several perpetrators, confirm Littner's report in specific detail and place it within a stark historical picture. Himmler saw Galicia as the easternmost region of "re-Germanization": after the elimination of the Jews, more than half of the Ukrainian and Polish populations were marked for forced resettlement into Russia and Siberia. This grandiose geopolitical fantasy not only caused the establishment of murderous work camps aimed at constructing an Autobahn ("Highway-South") connecting Lemberg with Tarnopol and ultimately Kiev, but was also behind the drive to complete the total extermination in eastern Galicia sooner than elsewhere. Katzmann's hurried deadline led to unimaginably sadistic cruelties in the frantic liquidations of the mostly small and middle-sized ghettos (such as Zbaraz) and labor camps through

mass shootings and deportations between March and June of 1943. One week after this goal was complete Katzmann submitted a leather-bound report to his superiors.

Koeppen's belated claim concerning the 1948 book's fictionality is belied by that very book's reception over the last 50 years as an authentic eyewitness account. Not only did the Wiener Library catalogue of "Books on Persecution, Terror and Resistance in Nazi Germany" list it as early as 1949; the London-based library also acquired Littner's text in the form of a 27-page typed summary, entitled "The Liquidation of the Jews of Zbaraz," from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Apparently Littner had sent the summary to the Institutes's Cracow branch soon after the war. In the mid-sixties the summary, supplied by the Wiener Library, was entered as evidence in the Stuttgart trials of several "Tarnopol" defendants. In both book and summary Littner had named two of them, Hermann Mueller and Richard Rokita (the latter lived under an assumed name before being unmasked by Simon Wiesenthal), and described their murderously excessive behavior. The two historical studies referred to above even quote dates and figures from the 1948 book and especially from the letters it contains, ignoring and thus invalidating Koeppen's claim to authorship.

Littner shines light on the mixture of ordinary life and the instantaneous threats of being murdered. For instance, the German-run mail service functioned well until within two weeks of the liberation of Zbaraz in early 1944. In late 1941 Littner received a neatly addressed postcard (reproduced here in facsimile) from the "Judenrat" of a southern town informing him in German that his two sisters had "died" (code for having been killed in an SS-provoked program). He received desperate letters from his dying son in the Warsaw ghetto, but also many parcels and registered letters with cash from his former business partner. The Polish deputy postmaster knew about Christine's support of Jakob and often was given the mailings' select stamps. They were equally coveted by the German postmaster who wished Littner dead. The 27-page "Liquidation," showing a few items not mentioned in the translated version, relates that after postal delivery to Jews was discontinued, Janina wrote a "nice letter" to the deputy and he yielded up three parcels from Christine. The summary also mentions that Christine promised to describe to them someday the cruel things she had seen on her return trip through Warsaw, a promise suggesting their common hope that Littner would survive and be able to return to Munich.

In a more literary vein, it is fair to ask whether the sober record of extraordinary events which Koeppen edited shaped his subsequent stylistic development. In three novels written in the early

fifties Koeppen had established himself as the (by critical consensus) greatest, most innovative portrayer of post-war society. The third novel was *Death in Rome* (1954; English [Vanguard Press] 1961), a politically and culturally critical take on Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*. It deals with an extended German family at different stages of adjustment to a post-Nazi existence. For the older generation adjustment entails reformation of Nazi convictions and participation in the political and economic revival; among the younger, it produces obsessive guilt, religious zeal, and artistic innovation. One of the main characters, Judejahn, a former SS general sentenced to death in absentia by a Nuremberg military tribunal, now a high-ranking mercenary and arms procurer for an Arab state, comes to Rome to meet his wife, their son and his in-laws, and at the end he dies there. Because the book offers a visceral portrayal of a grotesquely genocidal Nazi, it struck a chord with readers and was translated into twelve eastern European and Balkan languages. During the cold war these countries may have had ideological reasons to fear hidden Nazi aggression in West Germany, but as the main sites of German war-time atrocities and the unconcealed mass killings of Jews they shared common memories. Judejahn's undiminished murderous pathology could very well have taken a page or two from Littner's graphic descriptions of wanton killings: "Judejahn did not regret having killed. He had killed too little and that was his fault. But the fuss that had been made later about his few corpses still affected him [...] Thus the thought of the unsuccessful solution of the Jewish question, the thought of the mass shootings ordered by him, the memory of naked women in front of open graves, now aroused perverse ideas in him." In a fit of sexualized anti-Semitism Judejahn kills the Jewish wife of his nephew's musical mentor, a globe-travelling conductor: "The black rim of the wash basin was the black grave into which fell those who had been shot. The Jewess must be liquidated. The Fuehrer had been betrayed. One had not liquidated enough." Perhaps Koeppen unwittingly heeded what Thomas Mann said of the Wiener Library's book and manuscript collections during a visit: "The German authors will have a lot to do before they have written up a library to compare with this one for truth and justice" (*Wiener Library Bulletin*, May-July 1949). One can surmise that Koeppen was impressed by Littner's grasp of the human dimension of genocide and in his own work would not flinch from portraying lingering links between the post-war political power structure and ex-Nazis at a time when the West German public (and the western Allies) had lost interest in bringing genocidal criminals to justice or forcing them to serve out their sentences.

Koeppen's chosen title for Littner's 1948 book had been *Notes from an Earthen Hole*, a play on Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* which apparently was meant to make the book seem more

fictional. What drove the 85-year-old Koeppen to say that the book was his “novel”? In a 1991 made-for-television movie about his visit to the pre-WW I (East Prussian, now Polish) hometown of his youth, Koeppen remembers the town’s many orthodox Jews who had moved there from across the Polish border as well as the non-religious Jews: “I had a [Jewish] classmate and visited his father’s pub in the town square. The pub does not exist anymore, the [Jewish] people from the countryside which frequented it are no more, the father is no more, the friend which I had is no more. There are no Jews left after the war. The war has destroyed all the Jews, and there is not a single one left.” His nostalgia for his lost youth blends with his sadness over the loss of Jewish life in eastern Europe. In 1992 Koeppen was confronted with the journalistic discovery that his 1948 pseudonym coincides with the name of a real-life stamps dealer in pre-war Munich who had spent the war years in Zbaraz and with the fact that Littner before his death in 1950 had written a letter to the publisher rejecting Koeppen’s rewrite. Koeppen stuck to his authorship claim and explained about his real-life model: “For me Littner had become a figure of suffering and thus a figure of fiction.” (*Spiegel*, 3/16/92). The human dimension of the Holocaust may have been vividly brought home to Koeppen through an actual survivor report, but just a few years later he permitted himself to believe that Littner’s distant suffering had taken on the status of fictional truth. The faking of Koeppen’s unknown early Holocaust novel and the subsequent discovery of an original 1945 memoir illustrate the fact that, when it comes to the Holocaust, factuality and fictionality are divided by more than just a line: they may in fact be divided by infinite space. Perhaps the ever increasing historical distance from the event is narrowing down this space.

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A German-language essay with comprehensive documentation of sources -- expanding on this unpublished book review -- appeared in *Jahrbuch fuer Antisemitismusforschung* 11 (2002) [also on this website].