

Eisen, George. *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games Among the Shadows*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. Pp. xiv, 153. \$22.50.

Suppose that the Nazis had decided to kill all of the Jews in Europe, and then proceeded to execute this plan with courtesy and polite resolve. What would we think of the Nazis today? In discussing the Holocaust, we must confront two issues that are, in theory, distinct: cruelty and mass murder. Would the Nazis have been “better” had they treated the Jews to be gassed with respect, rather than making them suffer for months and years? Or does the fact that the Jews had to be dehumanized suggest that even the SS could not condone the taking of “human” life, and so they had to convince themselves, desperately, that it wasn’t human life that they were taking? Would a sterile Holocaust have been more or less human than the mud and the filth of Treblinka?

This is not an issue with which George Eisen, himself a Hungarian Jew born during the Holocaust, is much concerned, but it does flutter around the edges of this historical analysis of play during the Holocaust. The deliberate attempt of the Nazis in Poland (from where the bulk of the examples derive) to deprive Jewish children of the opportunities to play, may seem-if we are not careful-to be their greatest crime of all. If adult sin is reflected in the faces of children, the faces of Polish children provide a brutal indictment.

One is struck to learn that one of the first acts of the Nazis was to prohibit Jews from using the Polish parks. The boundaries of ghettos were drawn so as to exclude parks. The Nazis recognized that flowers were political. The Jews did as well. Eisen effectively describes the debate within the Jewish ghettos of Poland over whether children should be encouraged to play in such desperate times, whether gathering children together made it easier for the Nazis to capture them, and whether organizing playgrounds made for the best use of the meager resources of the community. Does the emphasis on insulating the children by

making their lives “normal” in such abnormal times lead to a false consciousness—a belief that reality might somehow be different from what it is?

Significantly some of these debates over the value of play are echoed in happier times. How important is play to the life of the child—in the Warsaw ghetto and the American suburb? The issue is reflected in claims of those who embrace the Romanticism of Play as opposed to those who wish to see play as a decidedly secondary part of socialization. Because there was little else that children could do, play in the camps and ghettos consequently seemed more important. One is struck and surprised at the picture that Eisen paints of roaming groups of youth in the ghettos—an underclass that is rarely thought of as such.

In such desperate times, the best that can be hoped is that play can emerge in the shadows, that community can be created in the cracks. The economic structure of the community was altered dramatically, but nowhere more than on the premium placed on space. Those fortunate few with courtyards were able to survive by forcing others to pay for the right of access. As one Polish woman noted (p. 34), “houses with flat roofs have been transformed into city beaches.” Mothers with small children would pay for the right for them to play in such venues. Fresh air became a prized commodity. The spaces for play were shaped by the decisions of the oppressors.

And, so was the content of the play. Drawing on the voluminous essays and diaries written at the time and reminiscences produced later, Eisen demonstrates that children’s games drew on their new reality. Children in the ghettos and concentration camps would play games such as “Breaking Into Hiding Places,” and “Returning the Clothing of the Dead.” In the latter, an enactment of the killings of the Vilna Jews, the victims had to undress and a portion of their clothing was returned to the “ghetto” by the “Nazis.” Catching fleas and bedbugs was made into sport. The children of the Holocaust were not a generation without play—the play survived—but it took perverse, if mimetic, forms, and, as Eisen points out in his conclusion, those “lucky” survivors had to cope later with their stunted and deformed play world, even being, in some cases, unable to play with their own children.

Eisen, following Flavell (misspelled as Flawell in the text), accepts an “assimilation-accommodation” paradigm of play, suggesting that the play world of the camps and the ghettos served a purpose in helping children come to terms with the realities of their lives. Play for him is not false consciousness, not identifying with the aggressor, but necessary for health at the time. The argument is plausible, and what kind of experiment, short of one by Dr. Mengele, could we use to test the claim?

Children and Play in the Holocaust is a moving and important book. Not only does it describe the play themes in one historical period in detail and with insight, but it is not content to stop at description. Eisen’s ultimate concern is theoretical: what is the effect of play under duress, do we become what we play, and is play possible in extreme despair? One might quibble with some redundancies in this short book (we revisit the same places to hear similar sad stories)

and occasionally more background is needed for readers who are not Holocaust scholars (for example, about the historical role of “the often maligned” Adam Czerniakow).

Still, this book is without peer. The story of the Holocaust needs to be told again and again and again, from every angle, and, if the tellers are as skilled as George Eisen, we shall never forget.

University of Minnesota

Gary Alan Fine