

George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games among the Shadows*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

George Eisen presents to the reader a graphic analysis of a subject which may initially be regarded as irreverent if not taboo; namely the phenomenon of children's play in the ghettos, internment, transit, labour and extermination camps of Nazi-occupied Europe. To readers who may first regard the subject of Eisen's research as the juxtaposition of the serious with the frivolous comes the realisation that the play of children, in the most horrendous and degrading of human conditions was a dynamic response, inextricably linked to those conditions.

Eisen's approach is a fine balance of thorough research and analysis and sensitivity to the complexities of the human condition. This writing style avoids what has entrapped many writers on the Holocaust, namely grinding pessimism and bitterness. Eisen is to be commended on his ability to objectively examine the nature and purpose of children's play and games and still provide the reader with inspirational insights into the human spirit.

Play opportunities, both formalised informal in the most appalling of conditions are discussed at length. Rather than dealing with play catalogued geographically or chronologically, Eisen conceptualises the study to provide the reader with a theoretical structure which may be utilised to examine play generally and play in other specific contexts.

We read of adult attempts to institutionalise their children's play activities, to provide their embattled communities with a sense of normality, a cultural continuity, a psychological haven. Eisen clearly distinguishes between the contrived play of adults and the play of children, which was characterised by an 'assimilation' and 'accommodation' of the Holocaust realities rather than a denial of them.

I felt that without a broader overview of the historical precursors of the Holocaust, Eisen's subject may, for some readers, be disconnected from its shaping factors. I believe that the writer may have supplemented the text with such an overview including a selection of maps and a review of relevant official documents and decrees. Although I unreservedly recommend the book to the widest possible readership, I suspect that its most significant audience will be tertiary students of play theory, who may not have a thorough understanding of Europe under National Socialism or the plight of the Jews during the Holocaust.

Eisen is to be commended on his thorough chapter notation and extensive bibliography but I found his oral history resources were limited to a small number of personal interviewees (five), some of whom were interviewed only once. It would seem that this form of resource could have been more fully utilised.

To appreciate that play could co-exist and co-relate with human hardship is the strength of Eisen's message. I found his treatment of the subject a humbling experience, a writing style which engendered sympathy, understanding and optimism. This most readable book should be on the shelves of every educational institution library and in the personal collections of all those whose lives are touched by children.

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