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Book Review

***Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit. Erinnerungen jüdischer Kinder 1938–1945***

**by Johannes-Dieter Steinert, Klartext Verlag, 2018. 429 pp. 34,95€**

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Arek Hersh, born in 1929, was just eleven years old when German police came to his family home and compelled him to do forced labour in the Otoczna camp near Poznań. Initially, his father was supposed to be deported, but managed to go into hiding and Hersh's older brother also fled shortly before. Only Arek was left. After being medically examined and deemed fit enough for the gruesome work, he was deported to the concentration camp. There, he worked 14-hour shifts on the construction of a railway track. Decades later, he recounted on the hard conditions of the work, on hangings and on the death of fellow prisoners. One question that emerges when confronted with such a drastic story of violence, exploitation and traumatization from a person's childhood – which essentially urges us to engage on an emotional basis, with all the implications for our research that such a specific topic entails – is: How does a person process something like that when they are only eleven years old? Answers may lie in psychology, literary studies or in historical reconstruction. While all approaches may rely on the material of testimonies, Johannes-Dieter Steinert from the University of Wolverhampton has settled for the latter and has more than adequately embedded these biographical accounts in his new book *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit. Erinnerungen jüdischer Kinder 1938–1945*. The outcome is an excellent book, which future research will not be able to do without.

Forced labour played an essential role in maintaining the economic system of Nazi Germany. Due to the conscripts being drafted into the Wehrmacht, the rapidly increasing demand for labour in the German war economy could not be met. Millions of people were recruited under crude conditions, prisoners of war were assigned, people in the

concentration camps were forced to work. Among them were about one million Jewish child labourers, working in the construction of railway lines, barracks or defence installations, forced to effort in workshops, in factories and in the cities, punished, starved and murdered for various reasons.

Even beyond the sheer weight of the overall topic of forced labour, the issue of children in forced labour seems to be yet more dramatic. However, research efforts in this area are still deficient, especially regarding the aspect of memory. Steinert previously authored publications on minors and forced labour in the Second World War, including *Deportation und Zwangsarbeit. Polnische und sowjetische Kinder im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im besetzten Osteuropa 1939–1945* (2013). Following this first volume, the publication under review here is intended to have a successor that deals with Sinti and Roma children. The breakdown of this large-scale project on forced child labour into three major books is not only explained by limitation of space; nor does the different treatment of the victim groups seem to be the decisive criterion. Rather, the most important aspect lies in the fact that the subsequent narratives of the individual victim groups differ. In the context of Holocaust remembrance culture, forced labour is seen as part of the murder of European Jews and even as a possible means of survival. Hence, the book discussed here also stands out as part of a project which, when completed, has the potential to become a cornerstone of comparative research.

In the first two chapters, "Politik und Besatzung" and "Ghettos und Lager", Steinert examines forced child labour in the *Reich* and in the Nazi-occupied countries. The choice of a chronological structure traces lines of development and focuses in particular on the various incidents to which the children were victims. These considerations are opened up in the third chapter "Erfahrungen und Erinnerungen" and brought into the larger context of National Socialist crimes in general. In contrast to the first two chapters, both here and in

the following, "Kriegsende und Befreiung", the author assembles his thoughts on forced labour thematically, thus enabling a cross-section that compares working conditions, experiences of violence and, later on, narratives. The study concludes with a well written summary and an appendix containing references, archives, testimonies, literature and an index. Although this book is an excellent piece of work, in the following I will emphasize two points of criticism that are of considerable significance, especially for the usage of biographies and the research on memory.

Throughout the book, Steinert arranges the individual biographical episodes into mosaics, delivering a comprehensive and far reaching overview which simultaneously provides readability; a very important quality, considering the multifaceted difficulty of the topic. The author does not shy away from longer narrative passages and thus gives the individual life stories and biographical testimonies enough space to make an impression in and of themselves. Each section is not only intended as a detailed description, but also as a compilation of various perceptions, which the author sensibly brings together and comments on. With this large number of biographies, the author proves to be an expert on the individual resources, countries and memory cultures. More than ten years of work in German and foreign archives and libraries result on the one hand in the provision of a spatial overview of the European countries under National Socialist rule, and on the other hand in a comparative collection of biographical evidence, which gives the volume the nature of a thorough resource of reference.

However, this strength of the book becomes its greatest weakness in other passages: In some sections it is unfortunately not quite clear who is speaking at present. Steinert mixes statements from the reports with his own language, most likely owed to the narratability. Thus, in the chapters on the already complex subject of revenge and resilience (380, 383), the problem of a non-word-for-word rendering becomes apparent, and suddenly the reader

is not aware whether Steinert is transcribing or letting his own language drift into the poetic.

Likewise, the summarizing structure of the book leads to some disadvantages in regard to straightforward continuity. In some paragraphs, the repeated introduction of biographies seems confusing. Even if the reader certainly does not remember every single name, the constantly re-starting narrative of biographies does not exactly provide a coherent picture, but rather the impression that Steinert takes out those aspects that fit the context. For instance, the aforementioned survivor Arek Hersh is introduced from anew at four different points (53, 73, 212, 314), without any connection to the previous references being made. This results in leaps in the individual biographies, entailing the consequence of a somewhat confusing structure for detailed searching.

Another unfortunate drawback lies in the methodological approach used by Steiner. In the beginning of his book, he names gender and age as leading categories of analysis. A promise that is only half kept, so to speak. For in the following, the claim of this approach is only reflected in the classification of the self-testimonies and with regard to the gender-specific treatment of forced labourers, but not as a separate topic in its own right, which would have to be taken into account and also played a very important role for the victims in the context of forced labour. Drawing a comprehensive picture of life in forced labour also means not using gender as a prerequisite for the investigation, but to ask about the conditions under which gender was constructed and negotiated. Opportunities to do so can certainly be found in the reports presented. For example, Steinert quotes Liliane Segre, who speaks of having "keinen weiblichen Körper mehr" (385). Here it would certainly be interesting to ask about the entanglement of physical and psychological factors in the construction of gender. Similarly, one could ask about the possibilities of historical reconstructions of gender identity. A more extensive and perhaps more courageous use of concepts of queer theory would provide an opportunity to allude the conditionality and

historicity of the category.

It is the numerous stories from the many and varied contexts that Steinert summarises under the theme of forced child labour which certainly qualify the book as the definitive reading. It offers a broad collection of life stories. Given this, it is to be hoped that an English translation will be published as soon as possible in order to make the subject accessible to a wider audience.