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To cite this article: Juliana Geran Pilon (2022): People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present, Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/23739770.2022.2037840](https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2022.2037840)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2022.2037840>



Published online: 31 Mar 2022.



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People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present

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Kudos to *The Washington Post* for publishing Pamela S. Nadell's glowing review of Dara Horn's *People Love Dead Jews*. A professor of Jewish studies at American University, Nadell called it "a contender for the most arresting title of the year."¹ Indeed, it should win first prize for irony and ingenuity. Barely concealed behind the breezy-sounding words "People Love," cannily reminiscent of a soap ad, is the implicit understanding that "people don't love live Jews" and even its complement, "people love Jews dead." In her latest masterpiece, Horn means them all, and more. The best-selling novelist, professor of Jewish literature, and devoted mother of four does not hesitate to confront this hypocrisy head-on. At the core of her book is the thesis, stated in its opening lines: "People love dead Jews. Living Jews, not so much."

That understatement reflects a sadness too deep for histrionics and invective, a call to introspection both personal and communal. Though principally centered on the centuries-old dysfunctional relationship of Jews with the gentile world, the book goes much further. It is a reflection on freedom and individuality, on respect and self-respect, on faith and tradition, on time, and on death itself. A consummate wordsmith, Horn diagnoses with astonishing accuracy the origins, symptoms, and intransigence of the spiritual cancer at the heart of modern culture. Though antisemitism is perhaps the most striking manifestation of that irrational and ultimately suicidal civilizational affliction, her topic is nothing less than the meaning of being alive and hopeful in a world askew. Of course, death must be accepted, mourned, and respected, but only life, in all its messiness, brevity, and promise, can—and must—be loved. We love the dead by resurrecting them inside ourselves without illusions, facing their ordeals as they truly were, and ensuring that they happen "never again."

That, of course, is the purpose of Holocaust education programs, museums, and literature. Horn was already a published author when the insidious truth revealed itself: "I had mistaken the enormous public interest in past Jewish suffering for a sign of respect for living Jews. I was very wrong" (p. xviii). Horn maintains that it was a pathological, almost prurient, interest, a "deep obsession" that seemed necessary "to so many people's unarticulated concept of civilization, to their unarticulated concept of themselves. ... I came to recognize the mania for dead Jews as

something deeply perverse, and all the more so when it wore its goodwill on its sleeve” (p. xix). Faux compassion could be used to justify the indifference to and even hatred of Jews, often almost indistinguishable from that which led to those deaths in the first place.

But how widespread is this pathology, and how does it manifest itself? To witness it firsthand, Horn felt she had to visit sites at which real Jews perished. Not that she relished the prospect: When *Smithsonian Magazine* invited her, in 2018, to write an article about Anne Frank, she nearly turned it down. In a November 2021 interview to *Fiction Advocate*, she admitted to having felt “dread” at the prospect. Then it dawned on her that this was the very reason to take it on: Fiction writing had taught her that “the uncomfortable moments are often where the story is.”² Horn needed to understand that story, and then pass it on.

The Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, the museum established in the building in which Otto Frank and his family hid from the Nazis (whether German, Austrian, or Dutch) until they were denounced, was a good place to start. The story started revealing itself the previous year, when a young employee who used to wear his yarmulke to work was rebuffed. He was told that it “might ‘interfere’ with the museum’s ‘independent position’” on religion, and it was suggested that he wear a baseball cap (p. 2). The same excuse would not explain why only one of the audio-guide receivers, whose respective languages were all indicated by flags, was marked by only its name. At least they used Hebrew letters. Though hardly mere “clumsy mishaps,” Horn does not blame the museum alone.

That example is indicative of a far greater problem. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the European Union’s Agency for Fundamental Rights, “Seventy-three percent of the respondents in the Netherlands consider antisemitism to be a very big or a fairly big problem in their country.” Worse than that is the finding that “ninety percent of the respondents in the Netherlands consider anti-semitism has increased over the past five years.” The results for the other twelve European countries surveyed are nearly identical.

The museum does not appear to have had any perceptible positive impact on this state of affairs, despite the universal appeal of Anne Frank’s diary—or rather, because of it. For as Horn explains, it is precisely the many instances of the precocious teenager’s concealed Jewish identity that

are the key to the runaway success of Anne Frank’s diary and fame. This sort of hiding was an essential part of the diary’s original publication, in which several direct references to Jewish practice were edited away. They were also part of the psychological legacy of Anne Frank’s parents and grandparents, German Jews for whom the price of admission to Western society was assimilation, hiding their differences by

accommodating and ingratiating themselves to the culture that ultimately sought to destroy them (p. 2).

Not meaning to cast blame, Horn simply underscores the futility of that attempt, however understandable. In the end, the Holocaust engulfed them all: pious and secular, rich and poor, German-speakers and those who spoke Yiddish and other languages.

Shunning the use of vitriol, Horn is nonetheless blunt. Referring to Anne's most famous line—"I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart"—she comments: "These words are 'inspiring,' by which we mean that they flatter us. They make us feel forgiven for those lapses of our civilization that allow for piles of murdered girls—and if those words came from a murdered girl, well, then, we must be absolved, because they must be true" (p. 9). Small detail: Three weeks after writing about people being "truly good at heart," Anne met people who weren't. The actual ending happened "off-screen." As T. S. Eliot once wrote, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality."

But what about Elie Wiesel, who did record his own horrendous experiences of Auschwitz in *Night*, which became a bestseller? We must thank French Catholic Nobel laureate Francois Mauriac, who in 1960 assisted Wiesel in publishing in French, under the title *La Nuit* [Night], a much-sanitized fragment of the Yiddish edition of Wiesel's incendiary 1956 memoir, *And the World Was Silent*. Though slightly less explosive than the uncensored manuscript of the unpublished original Hebrew version (not discovered until 2016), it seethed with rage against the entire world, which stood by, silent, as millions were tortured and slaughtered. Mauriac could see that from a European publisher's perspective, that *crie-du-coeur* was a nonstarter. Once having been tamed for broader consumption, explains Horn, *Night* "repositioned the young survivor's rage into theological angst. After all, what reader would want to hear about how his society had failed, how he was guilty? Better to blame God. This approach earned Wiesel a Nobel Peace Prize, as well as, years later, selection for Oprah's Book Club, the American epitome of grace" (p. 10).

Since then, an entire cottage industry of Holocaust literature has sprouted, tailor-made for Holocaust studies curricula designed to enlighten people throughout the world about that horror, as well it should. But Horn notices a common thread: "Holocaust novels that have sold millions of copies both in the United States and overseas in recent years are all 'uplifting,' even when they include the odd dead kid" (p. 80). Though actual camp survivors bring audiences to tears, they are dying out. Many take their unspeakable experiences to their graves, untold, unable to hear their own voices. We are left relying on long-lost letters, fictional constructs in novels and movies, various museums, graves (some found only by chance), and the so-called "memorial sites." Horn expected most of the latter to

have been airbrushed to suit future generations' inability, or rather unwillingness, to confront the truth, with the names of the deceased preserved without the horrific contexts. In reality, the situation is worse still: Most of the names themselves have virtually disappeared.

Among the most telling examples of that phenomenon are those of Solomon Mikhoeles, director of the Moscow State Yiddish Theater a century ago, and its leading actor, Benjamin Zuskin. Among the founders of the Jewish Antifascist Committee, created by Stalin in 1942 to attract Jewish Diaspora support, these exceptionally talented and dedicated men were summarily liquidated after the perfidious dictator reached the conclusion that "these loyal Soviet Jews were no longer useful, and charged them all with treason. He had decided that this committee he himself had created was in fact a secret Zionist cabal, designed to bring down the Soviet state. ... [T]welve more Jewish luminaries, including the novelist Dovid Bergelson, who had proclaimed Moscow as the center of the Yiddish future, were executed by firing squad on August 12, 1952" (p. 61).

With exquisite moral precision, Horn qualifies the verdict of tragedy: "The tragedy...was not that these Soviet Jews sold their souls to the devil, though many clearly did. The tragedy was that integrity was never an option in the first place" (p. 62). The full context is provided by Zuskin's daughter, Ala, exiled to Kazakhstan together with her mother immediately after her father's murder, of which they knew nothing. Not until three years later, in 1955, when allowed at last to return to Moscow, did they learn the truth. Now living in Jerusalem, she "offers what hundreds of pages of state archives can't, describing the impending horror of the noose around one's neck" (p. 69).

Ala cannot contain her anger at the injustice of holding Nazis accountable for genocide but not the Soviets:

"They never had a Nuremberg," Ala told me that day, with a quiet fury. "They never acknowledged the evil of what they did. The Nazis were open about what they were doing, but the Soviets pretended. They lured the Jews in, they bated them with support and recognition, they used them, they tricked them, and then they killed them. It was a trap. And no one knows about it, even now. People know about the Holocaust, but not this. Even here in Israel, people don't know. How did you know?" (p. 70).

Simple: because Horn wanted to know. Fellow Jews who would rather ignore what happened may well be afraid that they themselves might be similarly ensnared. It is abundantly clear that such traps are everywhere. As Horn discovered, they exist even back in her own beloved home, "the wonderland of a country that long ago gave [her] family a future" (p. xvii).

An ideal family life had shielded her from the bitter fact that her own conception of being Jewish, intrinsic to her American identity, was foreign to others for whom it was defined principally as a sort of negation: A Jew is not a Christian, not a Muslim, Asian, or African American. "I am what I am not." In an age of identity politics, the same applies to everyone. When each is defined as "not-the-other," all traditions are perverted at once, a sinister *reductio ad absurdum* achieved by the nihilist scalpel plied with satanic precision. And all are pitted against all with equal vacuity yet maximum vehemence.

No group, however, is quite as vulnerable as the Jews, whose existence has raised a "question" that is all its own. Solutions have ranged from communal to national to "final," at least until the founding of Israel. But despite the nation's spectacular, indeed miraculous, success, it still cannot save those Jews who refuse to take yes for an answer to their never-ending angst. Some are simply incapable of unlearning the centuries-old insecurity that has led so many before to fall into the trap of seeking recognition and even, perversely enough, forgiveness. For what? For being themselves.

Horn rejects this attitude outright. Contrasting the Western conception of creativity, which expects art to make sense of the world, she celebrates Jewish storytelling for displaying "a kind of realism that comes from humility, from the knowledge that one cannot be true to the human experience while pretending to make sense of the world." Since man may never reach the ineffable, he must not dissemble, for pretended order is no consolation, but rather subterfuge. Jewish stories find consolation in the quest itself. They "are not endings but beginnings, the beginning of the search for meaning rather than the end—and the power of resilience and endurance to carry one through to that meaning" (p. 79). Order is not the point; life is its own argument.

There can be no better example of the difference between the two approaches than Shalom Alecheim's Yiddish saga of Tevye the milkman compared with its wildly popular version, the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Meant to entertain, the latter understandably lacks crucial details—such as Tevye's wife Golde and son-in-law Motl both dropping dead and his daughter Shprintze drowning herself, among other calamities. In the original, Alecheim's Tevye grieves for them all, but in the end, writes Horn, he "leaves the reader with a line that would never work on Broadway: 'Tell all our Jews everywhere that they shouldn't worry: Our old God still lives!'" (p. 79). How does he know? He just does.

Because how can He not live when He created life? He also created man free to believe, to love his fellow man as himself, raise a family, and rejoice. Of course, he is also free to do evil, to forget the past, or prettify it while closing his eyes to his own cupidity. He can ingratiate himself with those more powerful than he, though he can also choose to follow his conscience, hurting no one else—which is the essence of freedom, explains Horn. Accordingly, "as long as Jews existed in

any society, there was evidence that it in fact wasn't necessary to believe what everyone else believed, that those who disagreed with their neighbors could survive and even flourish against all odds" (p. 107).

This is no mere exercise in contentless relativism or disagreement for its own sake, but an affirmation of memory and the inestimable value of all human life. "In America," writes Horn, "time was supposed to be a straight line where only the future mattered." Your ancestry was irrelevant. "[W]hat matters is what you do now with the opportunities this country presents," a legend largely untrue, which nonetheless "does not detract from its power" as an expression of the nation's ideal. But if only the future matters, the past is easily forgotten, if not outright repurposed for political ends, while the present is but a shadow, always imperfect. A Jewish perspective, on the other hand, is like "a spiral, a tangled old telephone cord in which the future was the present which was essentially the past" (p. xvi). Progress may not be an illusion, but earthly utopia surely is.

After declaring that humans cannot take too much reality, T.S. Eliot's poem continues: "Time past and time future/ What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present." Horn disagrees. Life has taught her that not only Jews but everyone possesses layers of "vanished days within them, whether or not they knew it. There was an alternative to being trapped in the present: a deep consciousness of memory that transcended any one person or lifetime" (p. xvii).

Memory is its own reward, but its function is less to soothe than to enrich. Horn advises readers not to ask a book about Jewish suffering "to uplift us, the way we expect, obscenely, for every other book about atrocity." Such a book is Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life*, about the Łódź, Ghetto, which "provides, one might say, a service to mankind: it broadens your life beyond your own imagining, allowing your life to include many other lives within it" (p. 86). To love those who came before us is to love life itself, to love humanity in each of us and thereby ourselves. Citing Rosenfarb's exquisite poem "Praise," Horn urges us, when the light fades, to "look back one more time, at that bubble of reality" we call our life "and praise it" before the day drips out, "vanished, in the night of forgetting." So long as we have breath, let us not forget.

Note

¹ Pamela S. Nadell, "Are Jewish ghosts more valued than Jewish lives?" *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/are-jewish-ghosts-more-valued-than-jewish-lives/2021/10/13/0c432340-076c-11ec-a654-900a78538242_story.html.

² "Write Like a Mother: Dara Horn," *Fiction Advocate*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.fictionadvocate.com/2021/11/03/write-like-a-mother-dara-horn/>.