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Title: Book Review: Forging Shoah Memories: Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust by Stefania Lucamante

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Author: Gabriella Romani

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Lucamante, Stefania. *Forging Shoah Memories: Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. 291. ISBN 9781137382689. \$95 (hardcover). \$90 (softcover). \$74.99 (eBook).

A few years ago, Elena Loewenthal complained that the Jew remains virtually unknown in Italy. Stefania Lucamante's book may be understood as a critical response to this call to create knowledge about Jewish culture in Italy. Focusing her study on seven women writers, Lina Millu, Edith Bruck, Lia Levi, Rosetta Loy, Giacomina Limentani, Elsa Morante and Helena Janeczek, Lucamante makes it clear from the very beginning that her book is intended to fill a gap in studies on Italian women writers while at the same time contextualizing Holocaust literature within the wider spectrum of Jewish culture and history. As Lucamante states: "The Shoah must be reinscribed with a Jewish history that has contained the abrupt rupture of Nazi persecutions and can move forward" (9).

Forging Shoah Memories is divided into three main sections, preceded by an introduction, in which Lucamante laments the existence still today in Italian Studies of a prevailing misogynistic attitude towards Women's Studies, resulting in a critical neglect of women writers. Two main ideas inform the premise of Lucamante's study: first of all, women's literary writings about the Shoah present a gender-specific voice that adds significantly to our understanding of the tragic events that unfolded during WWII, and, secondly, that testimonies of the Shoah alone cannot fully respond to the need to create memory (for various reasons, including the often limited circulation of these documents) and to explain to future generations the ethical impact of historical events. Thus, the importance of what Lucamante calls "the duty of literature" and its ethical mission towards improving society and bringing awareness to readers (9).

The first section, titled "Survival and Representation of the Shoah in Italy," comprises four chapters. The first two chapters provide a theoretical introduction to Lucamante's analysis of the literary writings produced by Millu, Bruck, Levi, Loy and Limentani. In addition to discussing the issues of reception and representation of the Shoah in Italy, including the institutionalized *Giornata della memoria* (for Lucamante still a valid contribution to creating memory despite the criticism this commemoration has received over the years), the author delves into a fruitful, albeit complex, analysis of memory, the relationship between fiction and reality, and the gendered-identity of writers of Holocaust literature. One element that is not mentioned is the gendered-nature of the readership, something to consider given the attention paid not only to the process of production but also of the reception of these texts. Chapter three, focused on Edith Bruck and Liana Millu, provides a brief analysis of some of their works within a discussion of themes such as physical and linguistic displacement, relationship between mother and daughter (surprisingly, though, Bruck's "Letter to my Mother" was only briefly discussed), and the "ethics of dignity" which according to Lucamante represents an essential element of these authors' writings. Contrary to Adorno's famous statement (that art would be impossible after the tragic experience of the concentration camps), these writers demonstrate with their works that meaningful art not only can but ought to be produced. And Lucamante's analysis here rightly focuses on the ethical meaning of the act of writing, while revealing at the same time the unique import offered by literary elaborations on the Shoah. Chapter four, which concludes the first section, describes the works of Lia Levi, Rosetta Loy and Giacomina Limentani, and discusses the theme of integration of Jews into Italian society, with a focus on the Racial Laws and fascist Italy—the historical period mainly described in the stories narrated by these authors. It would have helped Lucamante's overall argument that Holocaust literature must be viewed within the general Jewish culture and History, if here she had further expanded into the earlier period of liberal Italy, with, for instance, a discussion of the very process of integration of Italian Jews after the emancipation of 1848 and their distinct history in comparison to other Jewish communities in Europe. Methodologically, however, Lucamante keeps her focus on the theoretical

aspect of some of the issues she has set to investigate, among them, most importantly, the question of the fictional representability of the Shoah, concluding with the statement that the novels analyzed in her study “complement survivor’s testimonials and memoirs in tracing Shoah representation in Italian literature” (148-49).

The second section, divided into two chapters, is completely devoted to Elsa Morante, whose *La Storia*, along with other writings, is presented in the context of a discussion on the creation of collective memory and how, influenced by Simon Weil and Hannah Arendt, Morante demonstrates a strong sense of ethical and aesthetic creativity. The third, and last, section, perhaps the most accomplished in the way theoretical and textual analyses are cogently merged together, focuses on Helena Janeczek’s two novels *Lezioni di tenebra* and *Le rondini di Montecassino*, as well as on her postcolonial thought. Lucamante’s emphasis on the distinction between the notion of ‘Children of the Holocaust’ and ‘Children of Jewish memory’—whether or not second-generation Holocaust writers should be mainly identified with the trauma of their parents—brings to full circle her intended attempt to develop and encourage new trajectories in the study of Shoah literature. Finally, Lucamante’s book is a reminder of the ethical mission of literature and our, as readers and critics, duty to pay attention to those writers who infuse their writings with a message of social and ethical transformation. At a time when literature in university classes as well as in civil society is becoming seemingly less relevant, Lucamante’s plea in defense of the dignity and ethical role of literary productions may be read as a warning about the times we are living and the difficulties we encounter in forging collective memories and identities.

GABRIELLA ROMANI
Seton Hall University