

Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, Eds.
***The Memory of Goodness:
Eva Fleischner and Her Contributions
to Holocaust Studies***

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This extensive volume pays tribute to Eva Fleischner (1925-2020) by gathering together many of her essays and discussing her life. Fleischner, who was born in Vienna to a Catholic mother and Jewish father, was devoted to study of and reflection on the Holocaust, to writing about it, to teaching it in several academic settings, and eventually, to exploring its impact on Christian-Jewish relations.

In a prologue titled “The Way She Lived,” editor John K. Roth recalls Fleischner’s life and works. He discusses the influence of her writings on him as well as the relationship that developed between them when she moved west to Claremont, California. In her retirement community, she met and befriended Roth’s widowed father, a retired Presbyterian minister. Over time, she became “like family” to him. When Roth became the founding director of the Center for the Study of Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights (now the Mgrublian Center for Human Rights) at Claremont McKenna College, he invited Fleischner to serve on its founding Advisory Board, where they worked together for years.

Following this presentation of her life story as a scholar, historian, and teacher is a creative chronological section. Roth and Carol Rittner—both distinguished Holocaust educators—present in chronological order major historic events (such as the accession of Adolf Hitler to Germany’s chancellorship; the Barman Declaration; the publication of Ernst Bergmann’s influential “Twenty-Five Points of the German Religion,” asserting that Jesus was not a Jew but a Nordic warrior) and events in her personal story. For example, they note that on March 12-13, 1938 Nazi Germany occupied Austria, and on July 20 Fleischner’s parents sent her from Austria to a convent school administered by French nuns in Brighton, England. The cause-effect relationship is clear.

The authors meticulously trace her development into a scholar and teacher of the Holocaust and discuss her major influence in the field of Christian-Jewish relations. They offer a chronological narrative, from her education and receipt of a

Ph.D. at Marquette University followed by decades teaching religion at Montclair State College (now University) until her retirement in 1991. They also discuss her personal development, especially her finding a spiritual home in the Grail, an international ecumenical women's movement, and her beginning an intense Christian formation program, including study of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Several American rabbis influenced that development, including Abraham Joshua Heschel and Harold Schulweis. When she was searching for "meaning" in the Holocaust, Heschel gently rebuked her. "My dear Eva," she reported him saying to her, "there is no meaning to be found in this event" (42). When she was hesitant to include stories of rescuers in her writing (knowing how many more people remained silent or collaborated), Schulweis convinced her to include them. He said, "Our world, particularly our young people, needs heroes, models of courage and decency" (49). She went on to interview, befriend, and write about French women and men who risked their lives to save endangered Jews. This added an entirely new dimension to her studies, her teaching, and her writing.

There are two especially memorable essays near the book's end. In the first, on the "spirituality" of Pius XII, she argues for his piety, his concern for the German Church, and his dependence on prayer. She notes that one of his favorite books was *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis (which he knew by heart), a work that emphasized "an interior, solitary and ascetic religious life" (145). His choice of the priesthood (he was ordained at 23) came as no surprise to those who knew him. Noting that public figures such as President Roosevelt had a worse record than Pius in protecting vulnerable Jews, she points out that Roosevelt was responsible for sending the *St. Louis*, the ill-fated Jews' refugee ship, back to Europe where the Nazis murdered many of them. Yet excuses were always found for Roosevelt's action, while "vituperation and venom" were reserved for Pius' caution and inaction (144). She seems determined to defend him. But as the chapter unfolds, she compares the pope's timidity to the prophetic witness of men such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. who continue to inspire people today. Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero openly criticized his country's government and armed forces and paid for it with a bullet through his heart while saying mass in church. Yet his voice was not silenced; his influence grew with his martyrdom. Today he is a saint. Fleischner began to believe that a more prophetic witness was called for and wondered why martyrdom in the face of such genocidal brutality was never considered at the highest levels of the church. While she never states it officially, it seems she has come to identify with the "many women and men [who] today find Pius' concept and embodiment of holiness—prayer, sacrifice, penance—too narrow and other-worldly" (136).

The second memorable essay addresses "Heschel's Significance for Jewish-Christian Relations." Her tribute to the influence of Heschel emphasizes his "greatheartedness," his personal impact on Christian audiences, his deep commitment to dialogue, and his notion that religious pluralism is a desire, even a delight, of God (158). Despite the differences between Jews and Christians, Heschel insists they must work together to increase faith in God. She traces Heschel's activism at the Second Vatican Council, especially his interactions with Cardinal Bea on behalf

of the so-called “Jewish Declaration” (what eventually was promulgated *Nostra Aetate*), and his profound influence on Christian thought.

I would like to add a personal reflection: I was privileged to know Fleischner, to work with her as fellow Advisory Board members of the National Catholic Center for Holocaust Education, and to have co-authored a published paper with her. She had the elegance and charm that seemed to come from her Viennese background, and a smile that could melt an iceberg. I only saw her lose her composure once, when someone suggested she was Jewish, had converted to Catholicism to save her life, and should reclaim her Jewish identity. She replied by asserting her Catholic credentials, that she was baptized at birth, raised as a Catholic, identified herself as a Catholic, educated as a Catholic, and taught and wrote as a Catholic. She never denied that her father was a Jew, but like other members of his family, he was totally assimilated. She learned nothing of Judaism from that side of her family. He converted to Catholicism in 1936, but of course remained a Jew according to Nazi ideology and law. Her respect for Judaism came from her lifelong love of the psalms, her study of the Holocaust, and her interaction with rabbis and Jewish scholars as her career developed. She looked unflinchingly at the origins and development of the “teaching of contempt” in Christian tradition, and devoted much of her writing and teaching to addressing and overcoming it.

She leaves us, indeed, with the memory of goodness. This volume, memorializing her life and contributions, is a rich and valuable resource for educators, for students of theology and history, and for Christians and Jews involved in interfaith dialogue. In assembling, organizing, and interpreting Fleischner’s writings and discussing her life and work, John K. Roth and Carol Rittner have done us all a great service.