



# Holocaust

*Charles Reznikoff*

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## **Holocaust** Charles Reznikoff

Black Sparrow is proud to restore to print one of the great long poems of the late 20th century, Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust*, originally published in 1975.

Reznikoff's subject is one people's suffering at the hand of another. His source materials are the U.S. government's record of the trials of the Nazi criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunal and the transcripts of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. Except for the twelve part titles, none of the words here are Reznikoff's own: instead he has created, through selection, arrangement, and the rhythms of the testimony set as verse on the page, a poem of witness by the perpetrators and the survivors of the Holocaust themselves. He lets the terrible history unfold -- in history's own words.

Reznikoff's technique, says David Lehman, "contradicts the very faculty of understanding. He lets reality speak for itself, lets it state the externals of the thing or event, and leaves unspoken (or edits out) the emotions, which the reader may be counted on to provide for himself."

Few readers will forget the emotions they bring to *Holocaust*.

## **Holocaust Details**

Date : Published January 1st 2007 by Black Sparrow Press (first published January 1st 1975)

ISBN : 9781574232080

Author : Charles Reznikoff

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# From Reader Review Holocaust for online ebook

## franciszka says

documentary poetry at its serious finest. this book is one of my favorite teachers. utilizing only text gathered from testimonies at the nuremberg trials, you have to be ready to sit with the horror. (checked this book out from the library, but had to just hold it on a shelf/in my bag/in my hands for weeks before i could crack it open [had to be in the right space to take it in]. but when i did, i read it in one sitting.)

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## Beth Wisniewski says

This book is actually a long poem cut into sections that represent different aspects of the Holocaust. This topic has been an area of intense study for me since childhood and have read many books about the Holocaust.

I found that Mr. Reznikoff's poem was heartfelt, touching and objective. Although this subject can be very disturbing, this book gives the horrific details without being too graphic for the reader. Also, have some Kleenex nearby!

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## Jeff Buddle says

Does a poet "write" a poem, or does a poet "make" a poem?

I prefer the latter verb. And never has that verb been more true than for Charles Reznikoff's "Holocaust."

For this poem, Reznikoff doesn't write a word. The poem is built on two sources, the Nuremberg war trials and transcripts of the Adolf Eichmann trial.

Reznikoff never intrudes upon these texts: he slices, edits and lineates. He does not comment on the horrors the words recount.

And horrors there are a'plenty.

Reznikoff does not write, he winnows existing texts down to their barest essence. He takes history and allows reportage to reveal truth.

And what emerges is a poem. A poem with sections entitled "Deportation" or "Massacres" or "Gas Chambers and Gas Trucks" is a poem that can reveal the bottomless evil of mankind.

Because he doesn't write a word for this poem, Reznikoff seems to be saying that there's not a word to be said.

Nothing can capture the horror, the real visceral horror of Nazi crimes more than the words of those who saw it themselves. No poem. No novel. No song.

*Let's allow all this to unspool*, says the Reznikoff in my mind. And I imagine a coil of wire springing against its winding. *Let's tighten all this down into history*, say those who would placate us, but Reznikoff shows how the a coil of stiff wire will not yield to the turning of the spool.

Reznikoff has *made* a poem here. "Holocaust" is the last poem of his life, but is the first poem of his that I've read.

What an introduction.

By choosing to hide himself, to hide the poet behind the words, Reznikoff suggests that the horrors of the Holocaust cannot be encapsulated, locked down, trapped in a poem or novel. Reznikoff suggests that to actually sit down and try to create (from one's own imaginings) a piece of indelible literature about one of mankind's blackest periods is folly.

There are no words to be made. There is, however, this poem.

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### **Laurel L. Perez says**

This is one of those collections of poetry that just leave you hurting. Reznikoff used courtroom transcripts to create poems that are maddeningly painful. By choosing not to use names, he created work that exemplifies what could happen to anyone, and makes us question the hows and whys of the Holocaust. Additionally, he does not shy away from details, some of which after having read many books about WWII, I have never heard. Furthermore, he exacerbates what is common knowledge, and explodes it in ways I think only he could through his methods. I would recommend this book to all readers, and ask them to look at the values of such work.

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### **Robin Friedman says**

In its sparseness, eloquence, and simplicity, Charles Reznikoff's poem "Holocaust" remains one of the best literary attempts to come to grips with this bleak tragedy. Reznikoff (1894 -- 1976) wrote the poem in 1975 when it was published by John Martin and Black Sparrow Press. It is good to have it back in print.

Reznikoff was little known during his life. He wrote "objectivist" poetry which took as its motto "no ideas but in things." Poetry for Reznikoff directs the reader to things -- to reality and experiences -- rather than to ego or to the feelings of the author.

Holocaust was Reznikoff's final work. It is based entirely on the records of the Nuremberg trials and of the Eichmann trial. There is no narrative voice or "I" in the poem. Further, there are no names given, with the exception of the salutation "Heil Hitler" by members of the S.S.

The poem is told in a roughly chronological way in 12 sections beginning with the early deportations of Jews and ending with the pending liberation of the camps. The cruelty and destructiveness of the Holocaust are shown in spare, understated short poems. Here is the concluding poem of Section IV, "Ghettos".

"One of the S.S. men caught a woman with a baby in her arms.

She began asking for mercy: if she were shot

the baby should live.

She was near a fence between the ghetto and where Poles lived

and behind the fence were Poles ready to catch the baby

and she was about to hand it over when caught.

The S.S. man took the baby from her arms

and shot her twice,

and then held the baby in his hands.

The mother bleeding but still alive, crawled up to his feet.

The S.S. man laughed

and tore the baby apart as one would tear a rag.

Just then a stray dog passed

and the S.S. man stooped to pat it

and took a lump of sugar out of his pocket

and gave it to the dog."

Here is a section from part V of the Poem, "Massacres"

"They gathered some twenty Hasidic Jews from their homes,

in the robes these wear,

wearing their prayer shawls, too,

and holding prayer books in their hands.

They were led up a hill.

Here they were told to chant their prayers

and raise their hands for help to God

and, as they did so,

the officers poured kerosene under them

and set it on fire."

Reznikoff works hard so that his ego and judgment do not intrude upon the events he describes. The writing is simple, understated, and direct. The reader feels he is witnessing the events described without an overlay. To the extent possible, the reader is allowed to respond to the events directly, without the intermediary of the author, and with no superfluities or ideological commitments beyond the events themselves.

There are bleak scenes of horrors and killings in "Holocaust", both of individual people and of masses, in gas chambers, gas trucks, firing squads, burnings, and elsewhere. There are also a small number of episodes of acts of kindness. Reznikoff presents his materials throughout lucidly, simply, and with understatement. Here is one final passage from the book, from section VI, "Gas Chambers and Gas Trucks":

"The bodies were thrown out quickly

for other transports were coming:

bodies blue, wet with sweat and urine, legs covered with excrement,

and everywhere the bodies of babies and children.

Two dozen workers were busy

opening the mouths of the dead with iron hooks

and with chisels taking out teeth with golden caps;

and elsewhere other workers were tearing open the dead

looking for money or jewels that might have been swallowed.

And all the bodies were then thrown into the large pits dug near the

gas chambers

to be covered with sand."

Reznikoff is an American poet who deserves to be read and remembered. This poem of his old age will help the reader to reflect upon the Holocaust.

Robin Friedman

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## **jeff says**

Full of things i knew already, artfully rendered to remind me how goddamned incomprehensibly awful they really were. The note at the end that explains how he created the poems from the testimonies was exceedingly helpful and illustrative of the process of turning people's words into poems. Also, if you're ever feeling pretty satisfied with how people treat one another in general--here is your rebuttal.

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## **Juli says**

What makes this book amazing is not emotion in its contents, but emotion invoked in its readers. The poems are made up, not from fiction surrounding the real life events of the Holocaust, but by choosing carefully actual fragments of statements given as testimony by survivors and witnesses of these atrocities.

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## **s ss says**

By appropriating material from court testimonies about the Holocaust and then reworking, in minor ways, the words he stole, Reznikoff makes a harrowing, truthful account of what really went on during the Nazi regime. He does this in small stories about people, recounting nameless victims with hyperclarity. The book is a quick read, even for poetry, and is a must read if you're grappling with how to appropriate sources as a poet.

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## **Sharrice says**

Needless to say, everytime I read this book it made me very sad. I hated that people would be so cruel to other people. I hated reading about it. I also hated discussing this book in class. Going over and over and over what the poem ment, and why it was put in the book. I hated it. This book is a great work of art though. It go the message across effectively, but I hated reading it. It made me feel ill. Charles Reznikoff is a genius. He put the pieces and testimonies of these crimes together amazingly. However, I will never, ever read this book again unless I have to.

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## **Dane Cobain says**

I bought Holocaust after a recommendation from one of my university lecturers, and I'm so glad that I did – Reznikoff has a refreshing voice, and even though this is the only one of his books that I've read, I consider myself to be a fan. Basically, he writes about the human side of the holocaust, with a poetic voice that I'm jealous of. If that sounds like your sort of thing, read it.

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## **Eric says**

This book takes the testimonies of Holocaust survivors and puts them in poetic form. While Reznikoff does edit out passages and, obviously, insert line and stanza breaks, he otherwise maintains the language of the witnesses. What results is a sort of anti-poetry: The language is prose-like, and much of the impact of the text results from its ability to present the material as both powerful and banal, the banality resulting from lists and repetition.

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## Scott says

Does one ever really "like" holocaust books? This book is daunting, despite it's brevity, and haunting.

That being said, I think it will really change the way I teach the book Night this year. I think there is a certain truth to it that most memoir doesn't convey. While the trials are made up of testimony/memories themselves, the process of making testimonies in court seems to have more validity than most diary-style memoirs.

The challenge is going to be choosing which poems to teach. How Reznikoff edited the trials down to these is beyond me.

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## Chris Schaeffer says

The work of the archive is morally fraught, even more so when they approach the archive as a moralist. Reznikoff puts himself in a tricky situation by setting himself up as CURATOR of manuscripts rather than just witness to them. I think this book doesn't look good held up next to the more radical, more caustic 'transcript,' but it still has what it takes to ruin your weekend good and thoroughly.

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## Victoria G says

Reznikoff ger röst åt vittnena och överlevarna och lyckas på så sätt skildra både det oerhörda som är Förintelsen men också att ge något av värdighet och mänsklighet tillbaka till de många offer som får sina berättelser berättade.

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## Leslie says

I finished this book last night. It was difficult to do and not because it isn't transfixing. This is a book I would not have picked up on my own and I was skeptical when my professor assigned it for workshop. I tend to avoid holocaust narratives, in part because I feel inundated with them, in part because you know they will (as Allison says) make you want to drink the bleach.

Reznikoff collaged fragments from the courtroom transcripts of various trials (e.g., the Nuremberg trials, the Eichmann trial). He focused on the first person accounts in the transcripts; he pared down the testimonials but did not add to them. He did arrange them under various subheadings: massacres, work camps, children, etc. The resulting poem is brutal. Things that will stick: the flashy/competitive brutality of the s.s. men paired with their interest in destroying all evidence/leaving no trace; the strange focus on data collection and other methods (the roll call, the body count, the torture of every 5th man, etc); the haunting image of "gold teeth" extracted from ashes and the mouths of the dead. Something about the form lends to the "absorbility" the narrative; maybe it is the rhythm imposed by the line breaks, the spare language. It is so unsettling to be in these landscapes that are cramped and overpopulated only to be emptied and erased a few lines down.



