

## Reviews

Donna-Lee Frieze, ed., *Totally Unofficial: The Autobiography of Raphael Lemkin*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 328, cloth. \$35.00 US.

Reviewed by Robert Skloot, University of Wisconsin–Madison

From the evidence at hand, we inhabit an auspicious, extended moment in the Era of Raphael Lemkin, the coiner of the word *genocide* and the creative force behind the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Although he labored totally unofficially, his extraordinary achievement on behalf of the targets and victims of genocide has been well acknowledged, if not entirely celebrated. It's likely that this attention is attributable to the continuation of genocide worldwide—along with the recognition that the genocide convention has largely failed to do its work—and to the extended discussion of Lemkin by Samantha Power in her book *"A Problem from Hell": America in the Age of Genocide*. (The monograph won much praise, including the Raphael Lemkin Book Award in 2003.) There now exist centers for human rights and humanitarian awards named for Lemkin, major museum exhibitions and academic conferences devoted to his accomplishments, a recent biography and numerous magazine articles, and at least two plays (one of them my own).

The major missing piece of Lemkin's own written output has been his autobiography. The unfinished manuscript has languished in a number of archives since its composition over several years in the late 1950s; Lemkin's unsuccessful efforts to have it published brought him only frustration and disappointment. So the appearance of *Totally Unofficial*, edited by Donna-Lee Frieze, is an important and welcome event in the continuing efforts to make the "founder of the world movement against genocide" (as he sometimes signed his letters) and his totally unstoppable mission better known to the public more than a half-century after his death.

The strength of Frieze's years-long project lies in the coherence she has brought to a manuscript that was characterized by huge chronological gaps, narrative redundancies, unreadable alterations, and extended passages heavily revised yet still incomplete. Lemkin's life story, beginning with his childhood on a family farm in rural Poland and extending through the post-ratification years of struggle, neglect, and ill-health, reads splendidly in its entirety. With it, we are able to better comprehend the sweep of his relentless obsession and the extraordinary victory of his political objective. Although much of Lemkin's life and work are known (and are totally, inextricably linked)—for example, through William Korey's brief and readable "Epitaph for Raphael Lemkin" and John Cooper's detailed but flatly written political recounting<sup>1</sup>—having Lemkin in his own words in order to understand his life and measure his achievements is a special and long-overdue event.

The early chapters of *Totally Unofficial* reveal an innocence and wry, even ironic, humor, which, by the late chapters, changes to urgent pessimism. In between, we are treated to Lemkin's courageous escape from Nazi-occupied Europe, as well as his opinionated assessments of people, nations, and cultures. The centerpiece of the book

contains his narrative of how the triumph of UN ratification was finally achieved on 12 January 1951, the day he called the most beautiful of his life. The story is replete with heroes (Panama's Ricardo Alfaro, Pakistan's Sir Muhammad Zafarullah Khan) and villains (Britain's Sir Hartley Shawcross, the American Bar Association), and is exciting despite the fact that we know its outcome.

In the editing, there are some misspellings (*Hereros* not "Heroes" [185], *Quenco* not "Queuco" [193]), misstatements of fact (the Autonomous Republic of Birobidzan doesn't "exist to this day with a thriving cultural presence" [246]), and misreadings (a female acquaintance of Lemkin's is said to have danced with an exquisite "slant" [148], not *élan* as Lemkin wrote it). Some endnotes are less than useful, including long passages of treaty correspondence and the identification of a room number in a hotel Lemkin once stayed at. A more serious issue concerns the editor's introduction, titled "The Insistent Prophet," which contributes too little to a deeper assessment of her subject's often painful existence. Frieze's obvious pleasure at providing a text that "is Lemkin's life the way he wanted it heard" (xxvii) misses the chance to provide commentary concerning subjects that Lemkin *didn't* want us to hear; "insistent" offers only a bland and weak description of this enormously complicated and deeply conflicted citizen of the world. Frieze tries to smooth the edges of a very rough story.

The stresses on Lemkin were both psychological and physical. At an early age, he notices the "special delight in being alone," and the autobiography points repeatedly to the profound loneliness that, by sheer force of will, Lemkin turned, not without anger or struggle, into a motivating strength. Being alone became "an essential condition of my life," he wrote, a condition that began well before the destruction of most of his family in the Holocaust. Much later, in the years before his death that should have been crowned by admiration and regard, his life was despoiled by dire financial distress, importuning and threatening bill collectors, relentless adversaries, and deteriorating physical and mental health; together, they took a terrible toll on his finely calibrated sense of rectitude and idealism.

In response, Lemkin used the rejection and insult he received to confirm his permanent status, so common in Jewish culture, as an *outsider*: a Hebrew among gentiles, an accented immigrant among the native born, a self-appointed emissary among the officially sanctioned, an aesthete among philistines, and perhaps, from the personal details we possess of his personal life and correspondence, a man who, in relationships with women, dismissed physical love for political support and intellectual companionship. (It was an "avoidance" that his mother Bella had noticed and commented on years earlier.) Power, whose important book is neither noted nor mentioned by Frieze, quotes Lemkin's telling—and perhaps evasive—remark to a colleague in the 1950s: "I can't afford to fall in love."<sup>2</sup>

Lemkin, in the years of his painful struggle, was sustained by his total commitment to a cause from which he would not be deflected, by his education and intellectual gifts that protected him throughout his solitary crusade (the range of literary and artistic reference in the autobiography is remarkable), and by the sense of moral superiority that in its human dimension only could be described as vanity.

Thus, the autobiography reveals his aversion to three conditions, all of which came true: "to wear eyeglasses, to lose my hair, and to become a refugee." Much later, the second concern preoccupied his insistent champion, Senator William Proxmire. Though outwardly modest of demeanor and resources, it was self-regard, and perhaps self-pity,

that made him often solicit other famous people to nominate him five times for the Nobel Prize and fear of failure that compelled him (in 1950) to write Gen. Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, the vilest perpetrator of genocide in the Western Hemisphere at the time, to ratify his treaty. (The document was signed in 1948 but remains, today, unratified.)

A few years ago, Michael Ignatieff identified Lemkin's greatest personal contribution to the prevention of genocide as a "supreme act of the moral imagination."<sup>3</sup> In fact, the treaty established an entirely new basis for determining, judging, and punishing genocidal violence because it required nothing other than a selfless concern for the threatened lives of those to whom we owe nothing.

To Lemkin's antagonists, he may have resembled Willy Loman, Arthur Miller's threadbare salesman (who also appeared in the world in the late 1940s), traveling endlessly, burdened with memories of happier times, interrupting people to sell unnecessary goods. (Bertolt Brecht, also in exile at this time, called refugees "messengers of misfortune.") But Lemkin was a Jew wandering with firm and declared purpose, even as his detractors today continue to diminish his work.

At the end, Lemkin writes that he was "unable to enjoy joy." Yet, the autobiography provides evidence he could enjoy a good joke (Power wrongly calls him humorless) as well as the companionship of friends; a great number are mentioned in these pages, although at his death at age 59, hardly any appeared to pay their respects. (Willy's sad story ends the same way.)

But history sometimes "gets it right," and Lemkin's moral challenge to the world can't be totally forgotten. Although Frieze writes that "the shroud surrounding Lemkin's life remains," perhaps a more thorough and critical introduction to his fascinating autobiography might have revealed otherwise.

**Robert Skloot** (rskloot@wisc.edu), professor emeritus of theatre and drama and Jewish studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, is the author and editor of many works dealing with the theater of the Holocaust and genocide. His play *If the Whole Body Dies: Raphael Lemkin and the Treaty against Genocide* has been performed around the United States and internationally.

## Notes

1. William Korey, *An Epitaph for Raphael Lemkin* (New York: Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement Human Rights of the American Jewish Committee, 2001); John Cooper, *Raphael Lemkin and the Struggle for the Genocide Convention* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
2. Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell": America in the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic, 2002), 77.
3. Michael Ignatieff, "The Legacy of Raphael Lemkin" (lecture, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, 13 December 2000), <http://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/speakers-and-events/all-speakers-and-events/the-legacy-of-raphael-lemkin>.

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Joyce Apstel and Ernesto Verdeja, ed., *Genocide Matters: Ongoing Issues and Emerging Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Pp. 222, cloth. \$130.00 US. Paper. \$42.95 US.

Reviewed by Edward B. Westermann, Texas A&M University–San Antonio

If ever a title offered a point of departure for a book review, Joyce Apstel and Ernesto Verdeja's edited volume, *Genocide Matters*, does just that. On the one hand, it expresses such a fundamental truism that one is tempted to respond, If genocide doesn't matter,