Witness Through the Imagination

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Eternal Faith, Eternal People: The Holocaust and Redemption in Arthur A. Cohen's In the Days of Simon Stern

Arthur Cohen contends that all Jews, whether physically Holocaust-maimed or not, are psychological survivors. He maintains that the inheritors of Holocaust knowledge, whom he describes as "the generation that bears the scar without the wound," is obligated "to describe a meaning and wrest instruction from the historical." In his theological interpretation of the Holocaust, Cohen writes:

The tremendum is more than historical. It is an elaboration of the most terrible of Jewish fears—that the eternal people is not eternal, that the chosen people is rejected, that the Jewish people is mortal. If there is one incontestable article of the Jewish unconscious, it has been the mythos of indestructibility and the moral obligation of tenacity. Six years, nonetheless, nearly concluded three millennia of endurance. Is it a wonder that Jews should regard the tremendum as a caesural fissure that acquires with each decade a more and more profound metahistorical station as the counterevent of Jewish history, the source of its revisionist reconsideration and self-appraisal.
His novel *In the Days of Simon Stern* (1973) is a rich, culturally textured, complex philosophic novel. It incorporates biblical legend, theological, Talmudic, and kabbalistic discourse, and dramatic enactment of the Messianic redemptive theory to “wrest instruction from the Holocaust.” Praised by Cynthia Ozick for “a brilliance of Jewish insight and erudition to be found in no other novelist,” Cohen masters the sacred, theological, and mystical texts of Judaism to present a mythic odyssey of the Messiah in the Holocaust era. The novel examines the European-Jewish experience from the perspective of refugees, survivors, and documentary studies. Like most American writers, Cohen does not focus directly on the concentrationary environment. Instead, he places the Holocaust within the context of Jewish persecution history in the mode of Andre Schwarz-Bart’s *The Last of the Just*, chronicling specific examples from the Spanish Inquisition to Russian pogroms and incorporates testimony from public figures to supplement invented Holocaust histories for characters. More than any other American novel, *In the Days of Simon Stern* focuses on the Allied Powers abandonment of European Jewry and the failed efforts of the American Jewish leadership to bring the tragedy to public attention or to convince government officials of the need to counter its progress.

The novel’s story line chronicles the efforts of Simon Stern, a Jew informed of a prophecy proclaiming him Messiah, with the task of rescuing and rehabilitating a group of death camp survivors. It spans a broad time frame, beginning in late nineteenth-century Poland with the prophetic announcement of the marriage of Simon’s parents and their future son’s messianic destiny, traverses the immigration to America, Simon’s extraordinary rise to wealth and influence, and concludes in the post-Holocaust period with Simon leaving the confines of the Lower East Side to extend his messianic influence. Significant among the novel’s contributions to American Holocaust literature is its unique exploration of the bearing of the Holocaust upon the ancient Jewish idea that messianic redemption will come through historical catastrophe. Above all, it suggests a new future for American Jewish writing by opening the question of how to reorganize Judaism in the Diaspora after the European Diaspora has been destroyed.

The novel is a compendium of Jewish religious thought, history, and sociology presented in various modes ranging from ex-
postory essay to tales within tales, dream-drama, sermons, letters, meditations, and commentaries—all bound by the scribe Nathan of Gaza, who presents himself as a hagiographer, chronicling the life and times of Simon Stern, messiah. Although allusively related to the seventeenth-century Nathan of Gaza, supporter of the self-proclaimed messiah, Sabbatai Zevi, Cohen never suggests that the modern day scribe is following a false prophet. Although Jewish literature is rich with stories of false messiahs, and Cohen’s attribution of the name Nathan of Gaza to his messianic proclaimer raises doubts connected with the Sabbatain debacle, the fictional Nathan assures his readers that he has told the story of a real moment, never a psychological conceit. I think of Simon Stern as one correct moment. There are many times that need messiahs, but time skips over the moment, and the messiah, waiting ready in the shadows, does not appear. I have told you the story of a fulfilled moment. It is when God flees that we have tragedy. But it is as well the occasion when genius, risking the little that a man can share, holds back tragedy until God regains his courage and returns.6

A survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Nathan’s authenticity stems from his Holocaust witness and his prewar career as Torahic scribe. Blinded in the Holocaust, he is endowed with moral insight.

Having developed Stern’s messianic identity, Cohen introduces commonalities of traditional Christian and Nazi anti-Semitism in an internal narrative, “The Legend of the Last Jew on Earth,” set in modern Spain at a time when the church has achieved “the conversion of all the world to the Catholic faith” (D, 119). The protagonist, Don Rafael Acosta, is technically Catholic, but is actually a secret Jew, the last survivor of many generations of the forced Conversos of Iberia. Structurally the legend foreshadows and introduces the novel’s Holocaust sequence, and thematically it reveals both the similarities and distinctions between Roman Catholic and Nazi anti-Semitism. The section exemplifies Cohen’s superb fusion of Jewish learning and artistic imagination.

The burden of “The Last Jew” is the inquisitional confrontation between Church and Jew. Although the specific time of Don Rafael’s martyrdom is unspecified, it is evidently in the modern era since he is driven by automobile to the archbishop’s residence, and the media is technically proficient in transmitting the news of the Jew’s rejection of Catholicism. Acosta lives in the village of Gerona
on Calle de la Disputacion, which commemorates the medieval debate between Acosta's kinsman Rabbi Moses ben Nachman and the convert Pablo Christiani before King Alfonso and his court in Barcelona. Within the privacy of his home, Don Rafael lives as an observant Jew honoring the pledge of the family patriarch, Solomon ben Juhudah, at the time of the massacres of 1391:

> to obey in continuity and to death the seven principles of the faith of Noah. Moreover and wherever possible, . . . the observance of the Sabbath and the Fasts of Av and the Day of Atonement. They were then commanded . . . to return in fulness and faith to all the remembered observances of the House of Israel, to remove from themselves the deceiving guise of the Other Faith and to obey the God of their fathers until the time of the true Messiah—but this only when true service could be accomplished in peace, serenity, and without threat to life. (D, 120)

In Acosta lives the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, its philosophers, rabbis, poets, legists, mystics, and martyrs who flourished in Spain and endured trials and torments at the hands of the Almohades (Muslims who forced both their Jewish and Christian subjects to convert to Islam) and the Inquisition. Cohen introduces the Holocaust theme and Acosta's own martyrdom by reference to the Jewish persecutions of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century church, "pogroms and desecrations, . . . the fiery preachers—converts and Jew-haters all—who picked off, one by one, from the stock of Israel the finest branches and grafted them forcibly to the numberless trees in the forest of Christendom" (D, 118). Even with the introduction of religious toleration in Spain in 1868, "the spirit of Spanish intolerance remained pure and uncorrupt" and the Acostas continued to practice a secret Judaism. In the days of Don Rafael's parents, Spaniards were no longer obliged by law to be observant Catholics and the father began to educate himself and his family more thoroughly in Jewish practices. Don Rafael gives a priest and his parents hospitality when they are unable to start their car. Taking offense at Acosta's Jewish observances, the priest reports him to the archbishop and thus begins his trouble—a modern version of the Spanish Inquisition, including the public torment, humiliation, and murder of the last Jew on earth who, with his dying breath, repudiates Christianity and affirms loyalty to the God of his ancestors. Don Rafael's final words at his Vatican exhibition
are clearly evocative of post-Holocaust religious crises. Acosta argues, as do post-Holocaust thinkers, for the continuation of Jews and Judaism despite God's silence in the face of destruction. This redemptive legend ends with the narrator's report of the regeneration of Jewry by Acosta followers, and it inspires Simon Stern to found the Society for the Rescue and Resurrection of the Jews.

Book One concludes with Simon Stern uncharacteristically venturing beyond the Lower East Side to hear an address by Chaim Weizmann in Madison Square Garden on March 1, 1943. As he approaches the Garden, Stern sees a woman carrying a placard with the grim admonition REMEMBER THE ST. LOUIS. In this fine visual prologue to the speech, Cohen alludes to the fate of 907 Jewish refugees from Germany aboard the St. Louis who were denied entry to any country, including the United States, and returned to Europe and so to death. It is at this meeting that Simon learns that the Nazis have already exterminated two million Jews and hears President Roosevelt's telegrammed assurance, "The Nazis will not succeed in exterminating their victims" (D, 153). More convincing are Weizmann's final words, "We're being destroyed by a conspiracy of silence" (D, 153).

Cohen introduces a dream following the Weizmann speech to chart Jewish frustration with American government disinterest in the Holocaust. Evoking the December 8, 1942, meeting between a pleading Jewish leadership and an immune president; the dream suggests Roosevelt's physical paralysis is emblematic of the government's Holocaust passivity: "He sat becalmed by his power, sometimes forcing a crippled leg to shift its insensate weight, ... lifting the leg like a dead member which clung to him but which he did not possess" (D, 154). The dream foreshadows America's separation of its war interests from those of the dying Jewish masses. The dream president challenges the authenticity of the petitioners' report, as the State Department chooses to disparage evidence of the magnitude of Jewish losses in 1942. Roosevelt points to Red Cross documents, noting "the camps to be clean, no maltreatment, no disease, and few deaths. Excellent medical facilities" (D, 155). He reads directly from the report:

The camps in Eastern Europe are essentially detention camps while detainees await relocation to newer homes being constructed farther from the battle lines. It would appear the Germans are intent upon
Members of the delegation contradict the Red Cross reports, offering testimony from escapees, such as that transmitted through Switzerland and the free Poles in London, that cite the truth of German destruction. The testimony distinguishes between the initial killings in the German camps where one and two hundred died in a week and the Eastern European camps where the scale of the massacres was far greater. The president counters that war brings death to many and disregards the "alleged" reports of Jewish victims. The anguished Jew is unable to make the president acknowledge the distinction between those who die as combatants in war, civilians who die in the confusion and chaos of war, and Jews who are systematically selected for genocide. Simon appears in his own dream pleading with the president to "Open the nation and ransom captives" (D, 156). Simon's dream supplication evokes the St. Louis protest sign designating the United States Holocaust-era anti-Semitic immigration policy, a policy that denied Jews entry into America knowing that such denial helped assure the success of Hitler's genocide program. As the dream dialogue continues, Simon contrasts the president's empty promises with the harsh reality of massacre and the bare truth that the president has the power to save them by ransoming them, taking them into this country, and convincing the allies to allow immigration. The president's lame response is to query whether he should cable the Pope, a fitting conclusion to a despairing dream since the president's failure to act on behalf of the Jews is matched by Pius XII's. The dream sequence is a rare instance of Cohen's use of irony.

The confluence of the Wiezmann speech, the Roosevelt dream, and a visit from an old Hasid bearing the letter of Simon Stern's messianic election crystallize Simon's purpose: "to begin the work of redemption" (D, 161), to rescue Jews, in action independent of obstructionist government agencies. Simon Stern's messianic destiny is closely associated with the Holocaust. Simon's discovery of his election occurs in 1943 when an old Hasid delivers a letter containing the prophetic proclamation written by his father on the day of Simon's birth. The delivery of the letter coincides with Simon's attendance at Chaim Weizmann's Madison Square Garden announcement of the murder of two million Jews and the peril of annihilation of European Jewry amid a conspiracy of si-
lence. Simon, therefore, begins his messianic mission with plans to rescue a Holocaust remnant. Until then Simon had given his energies to the accumulation of wealth through real-estate investment. Now he endows the Society for the Rescue and Resurrection of the Jews, which is to be dedicated to the spiritual restoration of survivors. In a Jewish community on the Lower East Side, Stern envisions and builds a Bene Brak, as in the days after the destruction of the Holy Temple, to bear testament to the endurance of Judaism and Jewry. In the shelter, shielded from a ritually impure world characterized by anti-Semitism, Stern proposes to rehabilitate the European Jews not in the acculturated mode of American Jewry but in the manner of traditional Jewish learning and life. Although the major work of the society is to restore Jews in the context of Orthodox Judaism, its mission, and the novel's, is to bear Holocaust witness, to “testify to the world that it is a monstrous place . . . [to] hold up to the world the mirror of its desecration” (D, 253). This objective is pursued through penetrating exploration of the history and theology of Diasporan Jewry, examination of the historic correspondence of religious anti-Semitism and the racial model of National Socialism, concentrationary and holocaustal case histories, and documentation of American failure to counter the destruction of European Jewry.

Cohen looks beyond presidential and congressional disinterest in the annihilation of European Jewry to the American press's failure to report the magnitude of Jewish losses. Lackluster press coverage coupled with the State Department's suppression of reliable casualty reports speak to an extraordinary effort to suppress the truth:

> the news will go to Switzerland and from Switzerland to London and from London to New York. They prepare memoranda. Civil servants at hospitals and refugee centers in Switzerland take down information, write it up, mail it to the International Red Cross, and the International Red Cross speaks to London and says, “By the way, another ten thousand gone in Mauthausen and Treblinka. Tell New York, will you?” (D, 180)

The bitter tone of this speech reflects the frustration Jewish leaders feel in what appears to be a conspiracy of silence and inaction on the part of those in power. Only the Yiddish press covers the Holocaust with the urgency it requires, and although *The New York Times*...
occasionally publishes reports, it buries pertinent stories in the back pages of the paper. Corresponding to the efforts of Jewish leaders, Simon Stern and his assistant, Dr. Klay, publish announcements of the mounting death toll in the Yiddish press each month. They place statements coded to the weekly Torah readings:

Go Forth (Lech Lecha)
How?
Three million Jews are in Nazi prisons and cannot go forth
(except to mass graves and lime pits)
UNLESS
the Allies bomb the camps
NOW

Simon Stern's program, formalized as "The Ratner's Declaration of Conscience," outlines his shattered belief in human dignity and focuses on the recognition of universal disinterest in alleviating Jewish suffering: "No man will help them to survive and no nation may be trusted. They must go it alone" (D, 198). Stern's certainty of Jewish isolation results in his resolution to create "a community within the community of Israel... an enclave in which to cultivate the resources of stubbornness, a remnant whose strength shall be in mutual love and helpfulness and disdainful removal and estrangement from all others" (D, 198). Years later, when Nathan asks Simon if he believed literally in the principles of the Declaration, Simon qualifies the language, but reaffirms his belief in its uncompromising ferocity.

Book Two ends with a reminder of the St. Louis, an allusion to the world's acquiescence to the destruction of the Jews. Here Cohen addresses the Allies' rejection of a 1944 Nazi offer to barter a remnant of Hungarian Jewry for trucks and other supplies. Cohen's attention to documentary evidence and thematic development is well served in his creation of a letter to Stern's society from Joel Brand, the Hungarian Jew who was dispatched by Adolf Eichmann near war's end to trade with the Allies one million Jewish lives for ten thousand trucks, food, and medical supplies. In a letter dated July 11, 1944, which arrives in November after being delayed in Washington and after thousands of Hungarian Jews have been killed, Brand pleads:

I have told my story so many hundreds of times now, to so many officials, to so many governments, to so many emissaries, that with
each telling the story is condensed as the hope shrivels. It is the case
that during the early part of April, while acting as a leader of the
Jewish community of Hungary, I was approached by a high Nazi
official, Adolf Eichmann, who was responsible for organizing the
extermination of the Jews of Poland and Czechoslovakia. He offered
to sell me the lives of one million Hungarian Jews. He demanded in
return a quantity of foodstuffs, trucks, one truck for every ten Jews
(ten thousand trucks), and as earnest of his seriousness he offered
immediately upon confirmation that the transaction would take
place to move one hundred thousand Jews to the border for passage
into a neutral country. (D, 233–34)

The fictional letter describes the difficulty of dealing with offi­
cialdom, lists names of American and British representatives
Brand actually met with, and details information about his deten­
tion by the British and the identification of historic figures with
whom to negotiate the ransom of Hungarian Jewry. Incorporating
the names of the historic players from Jewish agencies, Britain and
America, Cohen indicts the British for their concerted effort to
thwart the release of Jews bound for gas chambers by imprisoning
Brand in Cairo and thereby preventing him from negotiating the
exchange of people for equipment. Cohen’s construction of the
Brand petition evokes the historic obstacles put in Brand’s way by
the Allies, especially the British, making them partners with the
Nazis in their willingness to abandon Hungarian Jewry to the cre­
matoria. That American officials share the ignominy of their Brit­
ish colleagues is evident from Cohen’s speculation that the letter
may have been carried about by Roosevelt’s emissary, coming to
nothing “for higher than his good will had been the communi­
cations and signals exchanged by the warring allies to disregard his
information” (D, 233), information following the known destruc­
tion of four million Jews by this time. In contrast to government
inaction, Stern sends six million dollars to Switzerland to save the
Hungarian remnant from the invading Russians and a million dol­
ors in gold to Raoul Wallenberg to save a few Jews he might still
have under Swedish protection.

Stern’s dismay about Allied abandonment of the Jews is ex­
pressed in remarks to his colleague Dr. Klay: “We must begin by
recognizing one fact: Jews are dispensable. There is no moral ap­
peal possible for Jews. . . . Mass murder is a victorious crime pre­
cisely because its scale makes it unimaginable” (D, 195). Anticipat­
ing that as many as five million Jews will be murdered by war’s end,
Stern determines to concentrate their efforts on the rescue and
restoration of the remnant, and to that end he creates a foundation called The Society for the Rescue and Resurrection of the Jews, to which he dedicates all his wealth. At war’s end, Simon travels to Europe to bring a remnant of those surviving Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Mauthausen, Auschwitz and other camps to the rehabilitation center he built. Thus, inversely parodying the Nazi death selections, the Jewish messiah now goes to Europe to make restoration selections, to select Jews of all classes and backgrounds, all professions, all capacities united by a passion for renewal “to do nothing but rebuild each other’s flesh and spirit, . . . their productivity and confraternity—shall be a witness that despite all, everything, Jews will endure” (D, 252–53).

Cohen rarely uses satire, but he occasionally indulges in it to ridicule Allied indifference to the genocide of the Jews. Paralleling British and American suppression of news of the genocide during 1942–1943 is the mismanagement of the postwar refugee program under the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Cohen uses Dr. Klay’s unwelcome presence at an UNRRA meeting to demonstrate the British lack of compassion for Jewry. The Americans are the butt of mild satire, presented as “energetic, concerned, pragmatic, and completely naive”; however, the British, who obstruct efforts such as Stern’s to serve Jewish needs, are the target of the sharpest invective: “The English . . . are all splendid personages, incredibly correct, even right-headed, but stuffed with a kind of punctiliousness that makes even the Pharisees models of flexibility” (D, 247).

It is generally through the biographies of Simon’s associates that Cohen introduces Holocaust documentation and commentary on the important link between pre-Nazi and Nazi anti-Semitism. A case in point is the history of Fisher Klay, an Austrian refugee who distinguishes the real Vienna from the romantic illusion, commenting that it is no surprise that Hitler was an Austrian. Contrasting the storybook, aristocratic Vienna of numerous concerts and operas and lavish ballrooms, and restaurants with the political realities of Vienna, he describes “popular Viennese anti-Semitism” rampant on the political right and left. He characterizes Vienna of 1938 as a city that tolerated daily riots, “Jews were being assaulted, humiliated, harassed. The National Socialists were upon us” (D, 187). In sharp contrast to Austria’s postwar denial of its Nazi fervor and ardent anti-Semitism, Dr. Klay describes an Austria eagerly welcoming the Nazis:
Eternal Faith, Eternal People

The streets were lined with cheering Viennese who put aside their cakes and excellent coffee long enough to shout 'Heil Hitler.' . . . they organized a parade. All the local Gauleiters were out in their polished jackboots and the Hitler Jugend were commandeered as cheerleaders and traffic marshals. But the Viennese, the Jews among them (however much they quaked), maintained their decorum, taking their coffee in the cafés, reading their newspapers and magazines, even talking about literature and the arts. (D, 187–88)

Klay’s emphasis on Austrian commitment to anti-Semitism and approval of Nazism is echoed by a Russian, Lazare Steinmann, who compares opposing totalitarian regimes and comments on pre-Anschluss Austrian attitudes:

You remember that Austria was beginning to behave with good National Socialist fervor several months before it was actually taken over. There were three staged trials against Communists and other political agitators. . . . I was curious to see whether they would be like the Soviet trials of ’36. More a question of comparative totalitarianism. . . . The same quality of cruelty and the same elevation of patriotic rhetoric. . . . Nazis wanted the credibility of the middle class smashed, wanted the school system which sustained the humanism of old Vienna demoralized. (D, 250)

Cohen turns to the history of a Russian Jew, Rabbi Lazare Steinmann, to enlarge the juxtaposition of Christian and Nazi anti-Semitism. Although he is a survivor of occupied Europe, Steinmann’s Holocaust biography does not include ghettoization or concentration camp internment. A radical socialist exiled from Russia, he escaped first to Austria then to Switzerland and from there to London where he was attached to a Jewish communications network, monitoring broadcasts from underground and partisan groups in occupied Europe and maintaining a file on Nazi crimes. Steinmann’s history illustrates historic anti-Semitic persecution of Russian Jews that was prelude to the twentieth-century European manifestations. Describing himself as “a Jew who has been on the losing side of every major conflict of the century” (D, 242), Steinmann suffered government-sponsored anti-Jewish terrorist actions and restrictions of residential confinement within the Russian Pale of Settlement. 12 The Mendel Beiliss blood-libel trial provided the occasion for the Black Hundreds to set fire to his father’s warehouse and burn the entire business. The government reply to the
elder Steinmann's appeal for justice is advice from the czar's secret police to leave the country. The victim exacts his own revenge by burning a church, the prime Russian source of anti-Semitic fervor. The son denounces this act as "a wasted gesture, a gesture of rage" (D, 244). He has harbored other hopes for the improvement of Jewish life in Russia, and while continuing his religious studies by day, he serves radical socialists by night.

Unlike Epstein, Singer, and Elman who concentrate their Holocaust delineation in one country, Cohen introduces a group of survivors of differing nationalities, thereby enriching the fictional canvas with wide-ranging Holocaust experiences. His approach differs from the approach of others in its use of short glimpses of survivor memories, which encapsulate the concentrationary universe rather than dramatizing it or inventing extensive memories. Like Bellow's Sammler who returned to Poland from the relative safety of England, Nathan's Holocaust history begins with an ironic return to Hungary from the safety of prewar Palestine. Having accompanied a blind uncle on a penitential trip to his parents' birthplace in the mid-thirties, Nathan remained in Europe after his uncle's death to study with a distinguished Hasidic rebbe. As did most Hungarian nationals, he felt distant from the war while in his remote village near the Rumanian border, and it was not until he heard German bombers overhead and reports of Nazi parachutists in the outskirts of Budapest that the war touched him. Three months later, he was at a detention camp that held victims for transfer to Auschwitz. Nathan characterizes his Auschwitz experience as "ordinary" and describes only one incident, his escape from death in 1943, an event that reveals common camp experiences: starvation, illness, and arbitrary death. Nathan's tone is always somber in his discussions of collective Holocaust experiences, but he begins his own story with an ironic contrast between the "efficiency" of the commandant's death selections and his own close call with death by "overeating." As he elaborates, the joke turns sour and the real tragedy of the concentrationary world emerges:

We were starving to death most assuredly. To overeat was little more than finding a cache of food and eating it all at once. An elderly Jew from Posen died in the bunk next to mine. I watched him die. It was in the middle of the night. Under his pillow I found three boiled potatoes, the stump of a carrot, and a crust of bread. I ate them immediately, fearing that in the morning others might ransack his
belongings looking for his food and strip me if they suspected I had hidden it. (D, 208)

The victim pays for his gluttony the next day with horrendous stomach pains and spasms of diarrhea, which he fears to be dysentery. By the following morning he is too ill to stand for roll call. Terrified of being reported sick and consequently sentenced to death, he hides himself among the corpses, which generally remained untended for three or four days before collection for burning. In this way, he steals a day's rest. In a detail typical of camp histories, he tells of prisoner bartering and methods for cheating the Nazis of their Jewish prey; Nathan's absence is noted but not reported by the kapo who is amenable to a bribe of three cigarettes, which Nathan has hidden for such an emergency. We learn from Nathan that he was moved from Auschwitz during the fall of 1944 when shipments of the lethal gas used in the extermination process slowed. Mass firing squads were reintroduced for the weaker victims, and the stronger ones were marched across Poland to southeastern Germany and Austria to be used as slave laborers in the Bavarian Alps. As the group marched toward Dachau, Nathan seized the opportunity to fall into a cow pit, where he remained hidden until the other prisoners were marched away. Hiding by day and moving and searching for food at night, he managed to remain free until January 1945 when he was found by three boy soldiers who fortunately turned him over to their sergeant rather than the Gestapo; from there he was sent to Buchenwald where Simon Stern later finds him. By this time, concentration camp ravages had conquered his body. He hobbles, dragging behind him a leg crippled by the commandant's wolfhound. He is also blind from eye infections left untended. Like Bellow's Sammler and Wallant's Nazerman, Nathan's perceptions are vivid, despite impaired vision. His Holocaust experiences have provided him special insight into the human condition.

Among the particularly memorable scenes of collective Holocaust suffering in American fiction are Bellow's and Epstein's Lodz Ghetto and Wallant's and Cohen's Buchenwald. Nathan's description of the liberation of Buchenwald is a tale of continuing death:

The process of mortification is not speedily reversed. Food does not feed; medicine does not cure; freedom does not liberate. The starving, sick, and imprisoned have first to acclimate themselves to the
reversal. . . . We are conditioned creatures, and when we have made a covenant . . . to die, it is not enough to announce its abrogation. Learning must take place. (D, 260)

The starving had to learn to accommodate food. Nathan was fortunate to vomit his first mouthful of nourishing vegetable soup, unlike others who ate gluttonously and died from “gastric explosion.” Thousands of survivors died in the first months of liberation and by the end of 1945, 150,000 survivors died.

Illustrative of Cohen’s capacity to incorporate Holocaust topics normally absent from all but full-length accounts of the catastrophe are his two brief independent delineations of physical and spiritual survival techniques. In addition to Nathan’s description of learning to take food successfully after starvation, he gives another deceptively simple account of the daily grind of Buchenwald survival skills:

All of us, those of us at Buchenwald and the millions of other captives elsewhere throughout Europe, had grown accustomed to struggle each day for a bit of bread, a minute of rest, a moment in a quiet place, the sight of a bird or a clean, unspattered blade of grass. A little thing would keep us going. A very little thing. You cannot imagine how little was our connection to life and how very little things managed to sustain that connection. The struggle was not against ideas, or people, or nations—that would return later. The struggle was against growing faint, losing weight, getting the runs, not being able to work. Those things meant death. Death was the enemy. And death was such an enemy that the meaning of life was bound up in the struggle against death. The struggle was every moment. (D, 264–65)

This passage effectively and simply demonstrates the Nazi policy of complete humiliation and debasement of prisoners and the prisoners’ struggles to live. Cohen captures the central paradox of extremity—that life persists in an environment designed for killing.

The society cook, whose Holocaust history includes three years hiding in a basement, two years in forced labor, two years in prison awaiting death, and rejection when she returns to the land of her birth, tells how a Maidanek concentration camp prisoner infamous for his cruelties to fellow inmates—for stealing bread and tipping over soup—inexplicably befriended her and tried to
comfort her with stories about the poor people of Lodz, or with songs and occasional gifts of a cigarette or a potato with no expectation of payment. Her survival strategy consisted of looking at the crematorium belching smoke and imagining the ashes, “Not bodies, not faces, not children or women or young boys or old men, but names . . . just names going back to be remembered and used again (D, 383).

Although the Nazis were highly successful in ridding Europe of Jews, their bloodletting did not cleanse Europe of its virulent anti-Semitism. Despite all Europe knew of the death camps, the survivors were not welcome to return to their homes. Cohen, like Bellow and Epstein, illustrates Polish zeal in creating a postwar Judenrein Poland through the story of a displaced Jew’s return to the village of his birth with “a Polish nationalist who had served as voluntary labor in a war factory in Düsseldorf” (D, 261). “The home of the Jew is occupied by a Catholic family which despises Jews. The Polish nationalist kills the Jew, and Poland is rid of one more Jew” (D, 261). The scene was repeated many times, and soon Jews despaired of returning to Catholic Poland, which loathed them as Jews, or to Communist Poland, which rejected them as Zionists. Instead, confirmed and reconfirmed in the knowledge of European anti-Semitism, they went to displaced persons camps to await emigration. Cohen’s Jews have learned the lesson of the European Diaspora: “We are what we are—Jews. That was enough reason to deliver us to Hitler and kill us if we survived” (D, 261).

In keeping with most American authors, Arthur Cohen devotes little space to the delineation of Holocaust oppressors. His villain, among the most enigmatic, is neither a German racist nor an Arendt-type banal bureaucrat. On the contrary, he is the victim of sexual sadism and racist experimentation, a self-hating half-Jew, half-Romanian, shaped by a violent childhood and European anti-Jewish pathology. Cohen introduces Janos Baltar metaphorically—cast in the Satanic role in a production of Job. In the Edenic landscape of the Rothschild chateau gardens, Baltar is seen in rehearsal, “a moaning figure, slithering across the grass, his hands sliding down upon his drawn-up legs, . . . shimmying upon the ground, foot by foot, dragging himself . . . angling and turning his body like a man become serpent . . . a beast of the ages” (D, 276). Portraying himself as a concentration camp victim, Baltar approaches Simon Stern as a dissembling demon, asking to join Stern’s society, to serve it. He fabricates a past of holocaustal suffer-
ing and devotion to a Hasidic rebbe: "I knew Bible, the Psalms by heart, backwards and forwards... Shulhan Aruck—all the useful laws and ways and means of interpreting them in good, solid style. I made myself helpful to small communities in Poland and Hungary, traveling around... preaching like a maggid and answering questions of law" (D, 288).

Exposition of Baltar's true biography appears more than 100 pages later, after we have witnessed intimations of his anger and after Simon Stern's key advisors, Nathan and Dr. Klay, have hired a detective to investigate his past. The detective describes Baltar as a frightening specimen, "a competent, skilled murderer, ... [who] appears to think of himself as a kind of inverted Christ, a crucified man who has the responsibility of opening up the wounds of the world and forcing them to bleed again" (D, 399). Janos Baltar's speciality in his Ravensbruck incarnation was

burning into victims the four wounds of Christ, and then as the blood would begin to flow and his victims groan in unendurable pain he would put a cloth soaked in vinegar upon them, he would bathe their heads, he would hold them in his arms until they revived or died. And then most curiously he would become deeply melancholic, weep pitiably, begin to recite snatches of Hebrew prayers it was not believed he knew and then disappear to sleep it off, and, upon reawakening, have no recollection of the torments he had inflicted. (D, 399–400)

Cohen follows this rare graphic depiction of concentration camp atrocity with a lengthy account of Baltar's life explaining his criminal personality. A product of European corruption and hatred, he was himself a victim of violence and, therefore, becomes a perpetrator of violence against the helpless. Born into a society that established opportunities on the basis of religious and ethnic identity, he was at a disadvantage. Since his father was a Jew and his mother a Christian, "he knew that according to the Jews he was no Jew, and according to the Nazis completely a Jew. In short he belonged to no one" (D, 400). Shortly before the German invasion of Poland, an old Jew addresses Baltar as "Miserable Jew" and tells him that the birthmark on his forehead is an ominous sign of his violent character and begs him to "pray God to die before you kill" (D, 408). So traumatized is Baltar by this annunciation that he is removed to a sanatorium where he becomes the experimental sub-
ject for shock treatment, hydrotherapy, hypnosis, and psychiatric interviews, "conducted in a spirit of genial cruelty" (D, 409). He is the patient of a doctor deeply interested in race theory and purification, who "regarded Baltar's history as a splendid example of precisely the degeneracy and restoration which his political mentor, Alfred Rosenberg, obliged him to endorse in return for the annual state subsidy his institution received" (D, 409). Baltar is transformed according to Nazi racist philosophy, a monster created in the Nazi laboratory, "winnowed of his father's impurities and restored by medical treatment to an Aryanism which could be prudently employed by the Party" (D, 490). Upon his doctor's recommendation, he is admitted to the German army in 1941 and by 1942 works at Ravensbrück, "where he distinguished himself for . . . sadism" (D, 409). A Viennese who served with him described him as "a sadist, whose pleasure was to undertake the torture and then succor and ease the pain of the tortured" (D, 399). During the course of his Ravensbruck service, he is reported to have been responsible for the torturing and murdering of three inmates and the crippling of many more, "all of whom were found pierced with scalpel efficiency in the same manner as had been the crucified Messiah" (D, 409). Baltar's passion thus appears to include psychotic fusion of Christian and Nazi anti-Semitism. That his hatred does not end with the war is amply demonstrated in his contrivance to join Simon Stern's Society for the Rescue and Resurrection of the Jews in an attempt to exercise his homocidal mania in the context of a Jewish population. Baltar's postwar holocaustal ambition reflects Nazism's denial of Jewish life in any form and its use of modern technology to achieve the goal.

Baltar's character is a manifestation of Cohen's thesis that the evil of the Holocaust resonates endlessly.

The evil of this age, . . . is crystallized as a symbolic cloture which however past, is not done. The Holocaust is fixed to a time but resonates endlessly and without end. It is seen as ultimate evil, intending by such ultimacy a consummate destructiveness. The Holocaust, in its immediacy, constellates everything that we mean by evil and, as such, is a perfected figuration of the demonic. In this respect, it is borne into the life of memory, . . . as an order of being which sinks roots deep into the human passio and, though cut off, lurks in the spirit available to succor and renascence. It is not, as were the earlier catastrophes of Jewish history, the concomitant of national
disaster or the aggravated *hubris* of a triumphant Church, but the expression of ordinary secular corruption raised to immense powers of magnification and extremity.14

Just as Simon Stern demands interpretation of the Elijah figure's "Legend of the Last Jew on Earth," so Cohen's Holocaust novel demands thought about the theological implications of the Holocaust. Although Cohen does not present the theological analyses and arguments of his expository works in the fiction, he weaves theological concerns into the narrative through the meditations of the scribe, dialogues between the messianic redeemer and his staff, and in a biblical play that is analogous to the medieval morality genre.15

The passage assessing Holocaust evil appears to be an early formulation of Cohen's *tremendum* philosophy positing a "transforming caesura," a break in interpretation of Jewish theology and history that denies the symmetry of Sinai and Holocaust: "it annihilates for us the familiar categories by which we have read and decoded our past. . . . The *tremendum* disallows traditional memory, obliging it to regard all settled doctrine anew, all accepted principle afresh, all closed truths and revelations as open."16

In keeping with the restorative and regenerative approaches to Holocaust tragedy espoused by Emil Fackenheim, Cohen's Jews respond to Holocaust loss by undertaking a major project of repair (*tikkun*) to strengthen Judaism and Jewry. In contrast to Baltar's destructive intention, Stern and Rabbi Steinmann build a fortress to house a rehabilitation center. Their model is the Akiva Bene Brak, rebuilding the remnant within the traditional Judaic system as a distinctive and separate religious entity. Unlike Singer's protesters and Elman's Yagodah, Cohen's Jews follow the tradition of the ancients, who refrained from blaming God for the destruction of the Temples, for the Exile, for the Diaspora, and for depredation, for the victory of Christendom and Islam. However, Steinmann departs from the ancient rabbis in his perception of the Deity and the covenant. To blame or try God is a futile gesture:

No need for a trial. If that were all, He'd be condemned in a trice . . . what makes me weep is the confident knowledge that God couldn't help it. . . . He is the rapture of desire—of eternity and incompleteness, without justice, incapable of politics and practicalities, but a dreamer of impassable visions, wanting to feel, but not feeling, desiring humanity, but unhuman. He is suffering perfection. (*D*, 255)
Steinmann does not expect God to think and respond in human terms; notions of human justice are irrelevant. "Justice," he claims, "is a human convention, a covenant of the fallible" (D, 255). Steinmann sheds no tears for humanity, but sheds tears for God because "He wants so much and can affect so little" (D, 255). Steinmann has arrived at a position that marks the Holocaust as an event so different, even from the previous Jewish disasters, that it must change our theological perceptions. To try God is to expect a participatory covenant and to expect God to respond to human petition. Steinmann's judgment anticipates the theological argument of The Tremendum, which insists on a break from past theology. In The Tremendum, Cohen argues, "the traditional God has no connection with the Holocaust despite the palpable fact that the immensity of the tremendum implies a judgment upon God." Simon Stern and Steinmann herald Cohen's later insistence that "Jewish reality must account for the tremendum in its view of God, world, and man; it must constellate Jewish facts of practice and belief in such a way as to enable them to endure . . . the tremendum and withstand it and a God who creates a universe in which such destructiveness occurs."

In sharp contrast to Rabbi Steinmann's capitulation to Divine mystery, Jonas Baltar presents a Job play calculated to undermine the survivors' faith in a just and benevolent deity. During his satanic role and narrative commentary, Baltar assumes an adversarial position, one that departs from the traditional Jewish interpretation of the Job legend and draws painful comparisons between the conclusion of Job and the conclusion of the Holocaust contrasting the restitution made to Job and the irretrievable losses of the Holocaust victims. His prologue establishes the ironic tone and juxtapositionary mode of the play. Like Milton's Satan, Baltar is often compelling. His Job is introduced as the millionaire of Uz, who erred, as did the Jews of Europe, because he kept wealth "in lives and tangible substance" and, therefore, suffered the tragedy "wrought upon him by a vain divinity unsure of his power" (D, 277). As the drama shows Job's physical trials and tribulations to the accompaniment of a passive God standing by weeping, the speaker questions, "Who the sinner and who the sinned against?" (D, 280). He challenges acceptance of the classical Jewish belief that the just suffer, their suffering being a test of their fidelity and the acceptance that man's finite mind cannot probe the depths of Divine omniscience. Baltar urges the audience to counter this view, because as Holocaust survivors, they know tragedy without Divine reversal—the faithful were not spared:
Women sang to their children before the open pits, and fathers held the hands of their sons, but the finger pulled the trigger and we toppled over into our graves. Untragic! Who was there to have pity and fear? (D, 281)

Holocaust diction juxtaposed with biblical allusion highlights Baltar’s peculiar equation of Job’s endurance—which he interprets as an effort to embarrass God—with his advice to the survivors to “be proud and humiliate the world” (D, 281). As the play concludes with Satan’s defeat, restoration of Job’s sons and daughters, and the doubling of his wealth, Baltar maliciously juxtaposes Job’s regeneration to the permanent loss of Holocaust victims.

Yours are buried beneath the earth of Europe, and your sons and daughters, issue of your loins, are not restored to you. And there is no less righteousness in you. Our only sin, . . . is that we are not God but know well how true Gods should behave towards us. (D, 283)

Baltar offers an ironic closing hymn, inviting the audience to join him in praising “our Lord God, protector and sustainer of Israel.” The hymn amounts to a celebration of the enduring people and denunciation of a God whom they honor but should not trust—the antithesis of the Jewish interpretation of Job, which advocates perfect trust. Unlike Rabbi Steinmann’s Jobian acceptance of Divine mystery, Baltar’s Job is in the tradition of countercommentary, an expression of Holocaust despair rather than Jobian faith. Baltar’s proficiency for countercommentary is dramatized again in his teaching of the Jonah story. On the occasion of the Fast of the Ninth Day of Av, commemorating historic collective catastrophes in Jewish history, including the destruction of the first and second Temples, the fall of Bar Kokhba’s fortress, and the expulsion from Spain, Baltar inverts the traditional Jewish teaching of the Book of Jonah as an illustration of human repentance and Divine mercy. Baltar drew “analogies between the ransoming of the penitent pagans of Nineveh and the destruction of pious Jerusalem—and lest his audience forget, the savaging of their own generation (D, 291).

Despite the caution expressed by his aides, their warnings of the “indefinable contagion of Baltar,” and his own reservations, Simon Stern accepts Baltar’s plea to join the survivor remnant in America. Stern explains his decision in kabbalistic terms that characterize Cohen’s post-Holocaust theodicy. This includes a percep-
tion of God as the creator of good and evil—"that God contains within Himself the possibility of good and evil" (D, 292). Simon concludes that Baltar comes to them because he senses in them the counter to his own villainy and they must, therefore, accept him. As the messianic figure, Simon addresses the heart of Jewish redemptive philosophy, the principle of t'shuvah, which posits the view that to sin is to turn away from God, and to repent is to return to God. Cohen here plays on the word turn echoing the Hebrew redemptive diction:

The very heart of the struggle between good and evil, between Baltar and ourselves, is that we are not all good and he could not be wholly evil. Repentance. Turning. Turning away. Turning back. Returning. These motions of regeneration are what the Jewish people must always stand for. (D, 296)

Simon speaks directly to the limitations of Jewish and non-Jewish philosophies that restrict God to being good and interpret evil as absence. He addresses the reality of evil in the universe, arguing that since its source is in divine creation it contributes to the complexity of creation and must be approached with the goal of repair. The assertion of evil's authenticity and power are repeated in Cohen's voice in The Tremendum, leading to his claim that too much effort may have been placed in preserving an outmoded theodicy without attending to the Holocaust-wrought need to rethink and redescribe both God and man. The vital question is how to affirm God meaningfully in a world where evil enjoys dominion.

Simon's comprehension that God embodies good and evil is manifested in his salvific effort to create a Bene Brak for the regeneration of the survivors and, after Balthar's eventual explosive destruction of the center, in his moving uptown to assume a larger messianic role. The blind scribe's assessment of Simon's move echoes Cohen's acceptance of contraries in his nonfictional exploration of post-Holocaust theodicy, his understanding of the necessity of distinctions:

First by separating the tremendum from all things and descending into the abyss, then by rejoining the tremendum to the whole experience of mankind as endpoint of the abyss and new beginning of the race, it is possible to link again the death camps, the tremendum of the abyss, to the mysterium tremendum of God who is sometimes in love with creation and its creatures and sometimes, it must initially be thought, indifferent to their fate.19