



***Witness to an Extreme Century: A Memoir*, by Robert Jay Lifton. New York, Free Press, 2011, 448 pp., \$30.00.**

An American psychiatrist in Hong Kong, fresh out of the Air Force in 1954, holds off returning to the United States and slipping into a conventional life. He has been interviewing the grim survivors of Chinese thought reform and decides to apply for a small research grant. Thus began the extraordinary journey of the American psychiatrist and public intellectual Robert Jay Lifton.

"Jay" was derived from Chaim Yacov, his mother's grandfather. He had a "Jewish Huck Finn childhood" in Crown Heights and found Orthodox Judaism suffocating (p. 16). In 1942, he entered Cornell University at age 16. He graduated from New York Medical College in 1948 and pursued psychiatry training at the Downstate Medical Center. Lifton met his wife BJ in New York just before enlisting. BJ, who became well known for her work on adoption, was a "loving partner and muse" (p. 411).

Lifton called himself "a historically minded psychiatrist" (p. 31) and "witness" (p. xi). He entered situations of atrocity, listened carefully to those involved, and wrote highly clear and compelling narratives of documentation and analysis that brought his ideas into the public discourse.

*Witness to an Extreme Century* provides a thoughtful review of Lifton's most important works. Intellectually, it breaks little ground not already covered in his classic works, but what is new and highly engaging is the story of his journey into some of the better-known horrors of the 20th century. Lifton divided the book into parts that correspond to his major studies.

Lifton's first study investigated how the Chinese government's "goal was to convert every filial son or daughter into a filial Communist" (p. 41). His psychological and political lens zeroed in on "totalism" and its eight deadly sins, such as "the demand for purity" and "loading the language." When he returned to the United States, his distaste for any kind of totalism kept him from pursuing psychoanalytic training. He found mentors in Erik Erikson, David Riesman, and several others.

Next came Hiroshima, where for Lifton, "my witness was specifically focused on the suffering of a people exposed to a cruel weapon at the hands of my own countrymen" (p. 99). One of his subjects described Hiroshima as, "One plane, one bomb, one city" (p. 112). The destructive power of nuclear

weapons led toward contemplating what Lifton dubbed "species consciousness."

His next major work focused on Vietnam. He wrote and gave congressional testimony about the My Lai massacre, defining the "atrocity-producing situation." He helped develop the "rap group" approach toward working with Vietnam veterans. This was not group therapy but discussions about Vietnam and American society. Lifton wrote: "I was becoming a very different kind of professional, one who could permit himself to combine specialized knowledge with passionate plunges into moral and political realms" (p. 191).

His next project concerned Nazi doctors. Lifton had to make a "hideous compromise," suppressing moral judgment so as to stick with the data collection. He recalled their attempts to use his interviews for their own rehabilitation and his repulsion over lunching with a Nazi doctor. From this investigation came his concept of "doubling"—"a form of dissociation in which the self divides" between an Auschwitz doctor and an ordinary husband and father (p. 274).

The book's last section, "Next Steps," centers on Wellfleet, where the Liftons bought a home in 1966, stabilizing their "nomadic existence." It became their most long-term residence and also the site of the Wellfleet meetings, described as part "professional conferences, salons, or communal gatherings" (p. 342). At these meetings, Lifton was not leader or guru but "a mere facilitator, perhaps a leader in providing a loose personal model that combines scholarship and committed dialogue with activism" (p. 343). He wisely resisted offers to turn Wellfleet into a formal academic institute.

Through Lifton's recollections, we encounter some of the century's greatest writers and thinkers (e.g., Kurt Vonnegut and Norman Mailer) as they engage in intellectual dialogue, friendly get-togethers, or vigorous tennis matches. A special place is always given to survivors, who offer "survivor wisdom." His story also reveals the important role of literature, calling Albert Camus a "hidden mentor."

Lifton is a hero to many in medicine and psychiatry not only because of his independent scholarship, but for the ways he managed to combine scholarship with activism, making each stronger. He engaged psychiatry with the political and brought a psychological and moral point of view to matters of war and peace that changed the public conversation.

Notwithstanding the extremity of events under Lifton's gaze, because this book is full of stories that are told with such

respect for survivors, love for BJ, gratitude to mentors, and overall passion and humility, *Witness to An Extreme Century* is one of his most satisfying books.

STEVEN WEINE, M.D.  
Chicago, Ill.

*Dr. Weiner is Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Illinois at Chicago and author of Testimony After Catastrophe: Narrating the Trauma of Political Violence (Northwestern University Press, 2006).*

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***Bad Souls: Madness and Responsibility in Modern Greece***, by Elizabeth Anne Davis. Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2012, 344 pp., \$25.95.

The enterprise of psychiatric reform in Greece during the last decades, mainly after the fall of the dictatorial regime in 1973, is of multiple interests: scientific, political, sociological, cultural, and anthropological. During this period, Greece, for the first time in its modern history, enjoyed long-lasting political stability and financial growth. The requests for social changes, including the reformation-modernization of social institutions, were almost ubiquitous. Under such a social climate and with the encouragement of European Union authorities, various initiatives were undertaken for the establishing and functioning of new community-orientated psychiatric services. The main aim of psychiatric reform was declared to be the development of sectorized comprehensive psychiatric services available for the total of a local population.

The book *Bad Souls: Madness and Responsibility in Modern Greece*, by Elizabeth Anne Davis, presents some aspects of the above-mentioned efforts, especially considering the everyday functioning of services in a catchment area of Thrace, northeastern Greece. Thrace presents some special, interesting characteristics: it is a multicultural, borderline area, with a high degree of traditionality, and used to be a region of ethnic and religious tensions. The author lived many months in this area and followed the activities of psychiatric services. These services are staffed by psychiatrists and other professionals, most of which seem to be motivated by a pioneering apprehension of their job.

The main psychiatric services operating in the area are mobile units, hostels, and a psychiatric department in the general hospital for relatively brief hospitalizations. Patients are no longer secluded in asylum-like psychiatric hospitals. Locally provided psychiatric services, continuity of care, and systematic sensitization of the population to mental health issues have enhanced secondary prevention and ensured a better quality of life for thousands of patients with psychosis and the members of their families. Analogous services for other categories of health care receivers (e.g., children with mental disabilities, persons with alcohol dependence or other addictive disorders, and aged people with dementia) have been established or are to be established. Unfortunately, their deployment (in Thrace or elsewhere in Greece) is threatened by the present financial and social crisis.

Ms. Davis's book is an ethnographic-anthropological approach of the above-mentioned activities in Thrace, with

many philosophical and sociological connotations. The author focuses on therapist-patient communication, in the context of the newly created services, especially considering the topics of responsibility, truth (suspicions, deceptions), cultural divergence (various "idioms" of psychopathological expression and understanding), and freedom and autonomy.

Throughout the pages of this book, many persons related to these psychiatric activities are presented—not only leaders and members of the multidisciplinary teams, but also mental health care recipients, patients, relatives, and members of the local community, each with his or her own history to narrate and own view to present. Throughout the book, the various narrations and the sensible observations of the author invest her theoretical analyses and vivid views: the surrounding landscape, the villages and towns, the small communities, the hospital and mobile units, the aspiration and disappointments of the protagonists, the conflicts and negotiations between different groups having diverging social interests and psychological needs, and, above all, the efforts of suffering people (of "bad souls") to handle their problems and to confront asymmetrical relationships and discriminative or stigmatizing conditions without losing their autonomy and freedom.

In my opinion, the author, being a keen ethnographer and anthropologist, has succeeded in gathering and presenting factual information that can help readers to make up their opinion about subjects that by far surpass the problems of psychiatric reform in a remote area (e.g., exercising authority and negotiation within the framework of modern psychiatry, the limits of scientific knowledge in psychiatry, the difficulties of modern reformatory, and the libertarian ideology to deal with the "inhuman face of severe pathology" [p. 4]). Probably, some might find that there is a lack of systematicity, or of cold "scientific" objectivity, considering the presented matters. On the other hand, the book has the power of fluency and liveliness. It seems as if sometimes the presented persons try to jump out of the pages and speak directly to the reader about their story or view.

At this point, I have to confess that I am one of those who participate in the efforts of psychiatric reform in Thrace. I met the author many times during her stay in Thrace and collaborated with her on various relevant topics. I have admired her devotion to her work, as well as her frankness, humanitarian spirit, and real respect toward other people. These qualities of character are reflected in her book that I recommend, especially to those working in helping professions who feel the need to enrich their knowledge and skills with a deeper understanding of sociological, cultural, ethical, and political issues.

MILTOS LIVADITIS, M.D.  
Alexandroupolis, Greece

*Dr. Livaditis is Professor of Social Psychiatry, Department of Medicine, Democritus University of Thrace, Alexandroupolis, Greece.*

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