

A memoir of the Holocaust and more

Reviewed by ABBY MENDELSON

"How Beautiful We Once Were: A Remembrance of the Holocaust and Beyond," By Marga Silbermann Randall.

"As a Jewish family living in Germany prior to World War II, we were respected members of society...When the madness began, to our way of thinking, it had nothing to do with us."

So Marga Silbermann Randall begins her Holocaust memoir, her fears, persecution, escape, and reconciliation with her former homeland.

Her parents' families were prosperous, settled, assimilated; they had been in the Rhineland since the 17th Century. Her father had served with distinction in World War I; her uncle had been awarded the Iron Cross.

Yet, Randall's families got their first bitter taste of what was to come when, just after her fourth birthday in 1934, her father received word that he would be taken by the Gestapo—and died on the spot. He was 49 years old.

Separated from her mother and sent to live with family members in the picture-postcard town of

Schermbek, she had an idyllic upbringing—the lake, with its windmill, water lilies, and swans; licorice on the way to school, summers in the country.

With the onset of the Nuremberg Laws, however, in 1935, the noose grew increasingly tight. Barred from attending school, doing business—even using public transportation—the family was increasingly isolated. Finally, Kristallnacht, November, 1938, sealed their fate. Awakened by a torchlight parade of brownshirts on their hideous mission, the Adelsheimers were driven from their home. After spending the night hiding in the woods, they returned to find their windows, furniture, and belongings all destroyed—and non-Jews beaten for interfering.

Facing the bitter German winter in a house with neither windows nor heat, after two months they were

gone, moving in with family members in a tiny Berlin apartment.

For a short time life was not so bad. Little Marga even had a nearby park to play in—until the Juden Verboten sign went up, and, barred from any semblance of normal life, they lived inside, blinds drawn, in internal exile.

Facing disease, and Allied air raids, the family waited, finally getting precious visas in 1941. Randall, her mother, a brother and a sister survived; the rest were lost.

Randall's aunt, for example, had "her short life bounded by two extremes: one day, queen of her home town [in an annual festival], an object of respect and admiration; a decade later, deported and gassed to death at Birkenau." Paula Adelsheimer was 37 years old.

Coming to Pittsburgh, Marga spent two years in a foster home until her moth-

er, working as a domestic, could afford to re-unite them in a small apartment. In 1947 the Silbermanns bought their first refrigerator. "We were Americans," she recalls.

It is indeed that sort of small, domestic detail that gives depth to this touching narrative. A sewing basket returned after more than 40 years, a table found and returned—such is the stuff of this tale. For as a second act, Randall did what to many is unthinkable. She returned to Germany, returned more than once, to visit people, to re-live the past, to attempt a reconciliation.

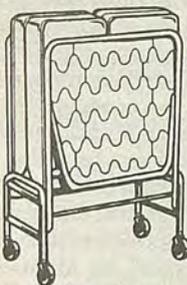
There she met many people who knew her family and expressed grief and regret—decent people who happened to be Germans and who were once bullied into submission and silence.

Rodef Shalom's Rabbi Walter Jacob has called this narrative "hauntingly ordinary," and it is, for here we see mass murder a pound of flesh at a time.

With this volume, and others, Cathedral Publishing emerges as the region's premier people's press—available, approachable, producing quality books. This handsome 94-page volume is nicely illustrated, with a map and timelines to help fix places and dates. It is history writ small, but perhaps that is how it should be.

In the end, Marga Randall's success has been enormous, yet not complete. For, as she puts it, "this is a very different Germany than the one I remember. In fact, even today many Jews in Germany do not feel secure. The threat of Neo-Nazism hangs in the air..."

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University of Toronto gets rare manuscript

TORONTO, (JTA)—A rare Jewish mystical manuscript that dates from the early 1400s has been obtained by the University of Toronto library.

The manuscript from the Zohar, the central book of Jewish mysticism, is the "crowning jewel" in a large collection of outstanding Hebrew manuscripts and printed books recently obtained by the university, according to Barry Walfish, a Judaica specialist for the library.

The collection was a gift from Albert Friedberg, an Orthodox Jew in Toronto who has been collecting rare Hebrew manuscripts and books for at least half of his 50 years.

Modern scholarship has assigned authorship of the Zohar to Moses de Leon, who apparently wrote it in the late 13th century. Only two known Zohar manuscripts pre-date the newly acquired Zohar, but both are fragmentary, while Friedberg's contains the full text. Its first page bears an inscription that indicates the manuscript was acquired for Amira, an epithet denoting the 17th-century messianic pretender Shabbetai Tzvi.

"The Zohar manuscript is the most valuable item" in the Friedberg collection "and the one of greatest scholarly interest," said Walfish. "It's the best manuscript of the Zohar in ex-

istence, to our knowledge. It's a very important work for the study of Judaism."

In all, Friedberg donated 35 manuscripts, about 100 printed books of exceptional quality, and three dozen fragments from the Cairo Genizah, ancient texts that were discovered in the Egyptian capital in the late 19th century.

The collection also includes two rare manuscripts by the biblical commentator Rashi—a commentary on the Torah and a commentary on the Prophets. Both are of German provenance, date from the 13th century and are considered of great scholarly importance since Rashi manuscripts from that period are very rare.

According to Walfish, the National Library in Jerusalem was seeking microfilmed copies of the collection in the early 1990s. However, after receiving numerous requests from scholars to study the Zohar manuscript and other items, Friedberg "decided these things were too important to be in a private library," said Walfish. "That's when he arranged to donate them to us."

The collection has not been microfilmed, although an Israeli company has been negotiating for the right to publish a facsimile edition of the Zohar manuscript.



Dear Deborah

By Deborah Berger-Reiss

The Awakening

Dear Deborah, I recently had a life-altering experience. I had cancer—a year of treatment, pain and hope. My prognosis, although "so-far, so-good," is uncertain. Because of it, I have become aware of my life—the past for sure, but mostly the present. Who knows about the future?

Today I feel a new clarity and a sense of vitality that I never had, and as a result, I decided not to waste another moment of my life living it only half-alive.

I have been clear of cancer for 8 months and getting back my strength physically. I have quit the job I've had for 9 years, moved out of my 16-year marriage and home, and am living very modestly off savings in a one-room apartment. I attend classes, am very involved in Jewish spiritual life, hang out with my daughter quite a bit, and take full responsibility for my choices.

The problem is that my family thinks I've gone crazy; but I know I have never been less crazy. I was in therapy for years, individual and marriage, always trying to make myself stay in unhappy situations (both marriage and job) for the sake of my child, family and community. Although I waste no time on regrets, I realize that I was truly miserable.

Now that I feel better, the quality of my relationship with my daughter has greatly improved, and I relish every moment

spent with her.

The problem is family members, my ex-wife and even my daughter are constantly pushing me at reconciliation with my ex-wife, at psychiatrists and talks with the Rabbi. How do I convince them that I am not nuts?

Free At Last

Dear Free,

You don't. It is difficult to adequately explain the effects of a major life change to another human being. No matter what anyone ever told you, for example, could you have anticipated the effects upon your life of having a child? The same is true with any great change, such as your illness.

What you do not make clear is specifically why they think you are crazy? Is it because you've always been one way and now you are another? Or might it perhaps have something to do with responsibility? Although you made it clear that you are spending time with your daughter, are you still paying for some or all of her expenses?

If you are being honest with yourself and others and assuming your fair share of responsibility for your child, then you may have to live with others thinking you mad. But if you have handed over the reins of life over to your true self with honesty, responsibility and consciousness, then mount that crazy horse and go.