
*After This* is the first published collection of stories told by Perth-residing Jewish survivors of the Holocaust; this alone makes the book worthy of publication by a local press. Nelson reminds us in her introduction that the number of Holocaust survivors decreases with each passing year, such that ‘these narratives are at once a bulwark against forgetting, a warning and an inheritance’ (p. 18). Indeed, some of the storytellers are no longer alive and the rest of their stories are told in third-person narration.

Geographical proximity with these 14 survivors brings their accounts of another time and continent close to home. The inclusion of individual and family photos from before and after WWII draws readers further into the survivors’ stories. I found it impossible not to cry. In fact, no other book has made me cry so much.

I have a few quibbles, but these are slight compared with the book’s achievements. I felt the collection could have included accounts by non-Jewish survivors of Nazi brutality, such as political dissidents and those who sheltered Jews during the war, thereby adding a further dimension to the representation of the Holocaust. I would have also appreciated a story by a Jewish survivor whose life in Perth does not fit neatly into a narrative of overcoming the odds. Such narratives exist and need to be heard.

An estimated 11 million people—around 6 million of them Jews—perished under the Nazis. To put these numbers in perspective, the population of Australia in 1940 was only just over 7 million. While some of the survivors in *After This* were sent to concentration camps, others escaped this fate by going into hiding, sometimes in unlikely and uncomfortable places. For instance, for twenty-two months Rosa Levy and her parents never moved beyond a two-by-one metre hayloft above a pigsty. When they were free to leave at the end of the war, she says, ‘our legs were so bent and stiff from crouching in the loft … that we could hardly walk’ (p. 129).

The first thing that struck me about the stories is the language. It is unadorned, straightforward, without artifice. What’s more, it is often devoid of emotion except at unexpected moments. Literary devices are capable of aestheticising violence and diminishing the reader’s ability to place themselves in situations of pain, suffering, and terror. The storytellers’ use of language left me without the protective barriers afforded by literary adornment. I had neither the beauty of literary language nor the comforts of conventional storytelling to act as places of refuge from painful emotions.

The often unsentimental, matter-of-fact conveyance of events in the book expresses for this reader their numbing horror. Take Fryda Grynberg’s description of her experiences at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen:

*Many people [at Auschwitz-Birkenau] became so depressed and frightened that they ran to the electric fences to kill themselves….*
After ten months, I was taken to Bergen-Belsen. Here there were no ovens, just piles of dead bodies lying on top of each other waiting to be burned. We were housed in a large barracks with a sandy floor (p. 64).

And at the close of war:

When we heard bombs falling around us, we gathered up our last energy and crawled out on our hands and knees and prayed that the bombs would fall on us and end our misery (p. 65).

With economy of language and straightforward description—the astonishing use of the word ‘just’ to describe the piles of bodies, followed swiftly by a prosaic description of her sleeping quarters, for instance—Grynberg effectively conveys how the inhumane treatment of inmates broke spirits, starved them of their humanity, and led to the wish for death.

There are also heartbreaking stories away from the camps. Henk Piller tells of how his siblings were spirited away over a number of weeks by a member of the Dutch underground in order to be hidden among non-Jewish families. Placing their trust in a man they did not know, Henk’s parents could not be told where their children would be taken: ‘I will never forget the screams of my parents as they stood against the wall and saw their beloved children taken from them. Each parting was traumatic. Now I was the only child left’ (p. 43). I found Henk’s desire for maternal love in the places of refuge to be quietly devastating: ‘It was the same everywhere I stayed; the men were always kinder to me than the women. This was very hard for me as my mother had been so warm and affectionate. I craved that motherly love’ (p. 46). Years later, he would reflect that the women were cool to him most likely because of their fears over the risks and reprisals posed to their families as a result of hiding Jews. Such details about the lives of children are hard to come by in history textbooks.

The end of the war did not necessarily end suffering. For many, victory was pyrrhic. Having survived extraordinary circumstances, some found themselves alone in the world, their siblings and parents having perished. Other families were torn apart; Erica Moen recounts how two of her remaining siblings no longer wanted any ties with Judaism, whereas a sister became extremely religious, leading to rifts in the family. Furthermore, anti-Semitism remained and in some countries intensified, resulting in pogroms. Many survivors still bear deep emotional scars and for years would remain silent about their wartime experiences.

The survivors end their stories on a relatively happy note, with descriptions of their lives in Perth. Each married and had children. Despite the lingering sadness, life in Australia is intended to reveal not simply survival but also a will to live, whereby the greatest defeat of the Nazis is to show that death might be left behind and that love can flourish.

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