

Book Review

Ornstein, Anna & Goldman, Stewart. (2004). **My Mother's Eyes. Holocaust Memories Of A Young Girl. Cincinnati, Ohio: Emmis Books. (p. 174).**

Last summer, in August 2016, I had the opportunity to listen to Dr. Anna Ornstein speak at The Bookstore in Lenox, MA, about her memoir, "My Mother's Eyes: Holocaust Memories Of A Young Girl" (2004). She suggested that human difference and cultural diversity should be celebrated; honoring the importance of individuality could still bring people together in a community. She thought about how her experience of surviving the Holocaust in Hungary varied from other survivors' experiences in Poland and Germany. What was most important in preventing genocide from happening was to not destroy entire groups of people for their inherent differences. Memoirs concerning the Holocaust, written from the perspectives of many survivors and their family members, during different time periods, reveal how collective memory is made up of the most fragile connections. Each story is a bead that is different from the next, colored by time and history and held together by a single thread. Dr. Ornstein included Stewart Goldman's illustrations because she felt that, ". . . they seem to connect directly with her experience in the concentration camps" (Ornstein and Goldman, 2004, p.173).

In his preface to Dr. Anna Ornstein's Memoir, Dr. Paul Ornstein, her husband, notes: "We are with her at every turn as she recreates the escalating terror from the time of the German occupation of Hungary, to the swift incarceration of the Jews in ghettos, to the vicissitudes of her various camp experiences, to the unexpected day of liberation, and finally to our miraculous reunion" (Ornstein and Goldman, 2004, p.7). The emergence of these stories is in itself a profound event. During Passover and Seder, Anna's daughter, Sharone, had come home from college, during her freshman year, and asked what freedom meant to each family member. In response to her daughter's request for more stories at the table, Anna began writing and talking about the years when she lived in a concentration camp. The Austro-Hungarian Empire had lost WWI and turned inward to target its Jewish citizens, "exploiting the ever-present anti-Semitism of the populace to its own political ends" (Ornstein and Goldman, 2004, p. 11). Cultural identity, family life and tradition became the protective shields in surviving these atrocities.

The chapter, "The Farewell", reflects the loss of her two brothers. Anna finds out that her brother Paul is on his way to a forced labor camp. She then discovers that her younger brother Andrew has been missing. She would learn many years later that Andrew had died of typhoid fever in Mauthausen, after the camp was liberated (Ornstein and Goldman, 2004, p.40).

Told in a stream of consciousness style, the chapter "Mari Neni" focuses on Anna reuniting with a kind and loving maid who was present at her birth and at her deportation. In 1971, Anna and Paul would return to Szendro with their children to meet this courageous woman, who was not afraid to declare her love for the family even at the risk of dealing with local hostility (p. 53). Upon meeting her again years later, Anna writes, "She felt my pain, my grief mixed with joy, and she, too, began to cry (54)." Mari also serves as a keeper of lost stories for the family. One story, for example, is about Anna's father desiring to become a physician. This leaves Anna wondering about how her father would react to the current news that both she and her husband

survived the war and completed medical school. Mari was considered another significant member of Anna's family.

On her return to Birkenau, with her husband and their adult children, Anna learns about the camps that were made to specifically abuse more ostracized groups of people such as gypsies, homosexuals and the Czech Jews during the war (p.143). The rest of this chapter, "The Steps My Mother Did Not Walk Down On", serves as a reminder of how widespread an impact the second world war had on people of Anna's generation (p.141).

Interspersed between transfers from death camps to labor camps, there are dreams about a past identity and a place in the future to call home. Early in her reflections, Anna writes: "Once our listeners are able to make the connection between us and the horrors they hear, they frequently say that we must be special. But there's nothing special about survivors; none of us is in possession of special powers. Those who have not been tried have no way of knowing their own resources, their own capacities for survival" (p. 17).

Dr. Ornstein's remaining stories depict a return to Hungary, escaping the final solution twice in their Auschwitz encampment. This return to Budapest would reunite her with Paul Ornstein, marriage would follow as would medical studies and finally arrival in the United States of America, further training and contributions to the studies in psychoanalyses.

From a childhood filled with aspirations, dreams and love to an adolescent's realization of danger, forced hiding, deportation and introductions to labor and death camps, Anna's memoir draws us into the deepest of journeys of survival. Her sharing of these memories, not only with her children, but us as well, is courageous and deserves to be read with compassion, respect and understanding. As Anna herself notes, "I cannot stop writing because these stories are memorials I am erecting in the minds of our children. I fear that if I stop writing, stop building the memorial, my children and everyone who reads these stories, will stop remembering the people we have lost – and those who are forgotten are truly dead (p. 14,)." The question is not whether her writing captures the joy and the love of life or that terror, loss and grief that holds many hostage - it does. As we walk with her, the question is: can we speak up to the recurrence of this horror, this particular past as it makes itself present? The answer may emerge differently for each reader.

Memoirs capture a slice of time, some, even expand the telescopic experience for the reader, into a particular life event and its impact on the writers. There are a few memoirs that not only capture a living narrative, they also bring the reader into the future, what can be called 'the living present; like epics they always remain current. My Mother's Eyes is one such book. The reader will have to slow down, read these stories thoughtfully and contend with their epic nature.