



Elizabeth Welt Trahan. *Walking with Ghosts: A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Vienna*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. 252 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8204-3692-0.

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Published on H-Scholar (March, 1999)

Haunting Memories

It took Elizabeth Welt Trahan more than fifty years to write this heart-rending account of surviving as a Jewish teen-ager in wartime Vienna. Her story shocks this reader, not for what it includes, but for what it leaves out.

On the very first page, one senses her reluctance to enter her past. Seemingly overriding the book's title, Trahan describes her musings as she walks in a small Massachusetts town in the late twentieth century. On the facing page is a photo of herself, a smiling eight or ten-year-old, held by her handsome father. On the following pages, she tiptoes forward in the present; she cannot bring herself to enter the past until page five. Even then, she dwells upon idyllic childhood vacations at a farm near Ostrau [Ostrava], Czechoslovakia. Then she quickly retreats to the present ... as well she might, considering what follows.

Without warning, on page 11 we read, "By late 1942, when grandma and the rest of the family were deported from Ostrau, I had been in Vienna for almost three years." It was chilling to read of a family holocaust disposed of in a subordinate clause. The next paragraph jumps backward to 1937, shortly after the Nazis marched into Austria; most of the family was still together, trying to puzzle out the meaning of a postcard from Aunt Olga, who, with her husband, Max, had fled to Italy. A few pages later, in another subordinate clause, we learn that "Olga didn't resurface after the war."

In matter-of-fact prose, Trahan coolly details the utmost tragedy that followed the Nazis' arrival in Ostrau: the panicky search for any place to go; the difficulty of actually leaving; the abrupt gravity of an official paper, a passport, a visa, money for bribes; the considerable number who "couldn't wrench themselves away from their possessions." For Trahan, the fluke of her father's Romanian passport prevented their deportation and allowed them to flee to Vienna.

Still tiptoeing into the past, Trahan digresses for many pages to introduce her extended family and calmly dwells on their fates—Uncle Isidor from Berlin, "arrested early in the war and died in a concentration camp"—before rushing closer to the present. She hastens through descriptions of her contacts with the survivors, most of them deeply traumatized by their wartime losses. Who would not flinch from such devastation? "So many people appeared briefly ... and disappeared again without a trace," she writes. "It was a phantasmagorical world ... mere names, faces, question marks. And we quickly learned not to expect answers."

This is as far as Trahan dares to venture into her own reactions to her experiences. At age 15, she leaves Ostrava to join her father in Vienna, bringing along her own diary. "I am no Anne Frank," she confesses immediately, but the few quotations from her diary echo poignantly, so poignantly that Trahan flees from the subject back into the present.

While her tolerance for delving into the past seems to expand as the book moves along, her tone remains distant, factual. Thus, we learn, on pages 100 and 101, that the Nazis did away with almost all of the 185,000 Jews living in Vienna in 1938. By 1945, Trahan was among only 5,000 Jews who were still alive in the Austrian capital. These pathetic numbers underline the atmosphere of doom that surrounds her accounts of her teenage friends gathering in a cemetery on Sundays to gossip, joke, and flirt ... as though they were hanging out at a neighborhood mall.

This book reverberates with the ambivalence shared by a great many Holocaust survivors. They want to bear witness to the horror that enveloped them, but must preserve their sanity by adopting a tone of utmost detachment and lodging the narrative firmly in the present. Trahan waited fifty years to write this book. After arriving in the United States in 1947, she earned degrees at Sarah Lawrence, Cornell, and Yale. Until she retired in 1993, she

had a distinguished teaching career at the universities of Massachusetts and Pittsburgh, the Monterey Institute of International Studies, and Amherst College. She is currently in the Board of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars and book review editor of its publication, *The Independent Scholar*. Her book would certainly make

a strong addition to the reading list for any high school or college classes studying the Holocaust.

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Citation: Alice Goldfarb Marquis. Review of Trahan, Elizabeth Welt, *Walking with Ghosts: A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Vienna*. H-Scholar, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.

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