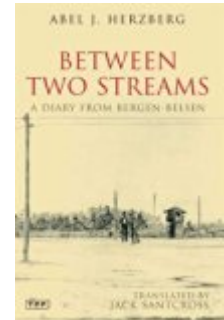


**Abel J. Herzberg.** *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen-Belsen.* London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1997. xi + 221 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-86064-121-3.



**Reviewed by** Eric Sterling

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Jack Santcross has recently translated Abel J. Herzberg's diary from Dutch into English. Herzberg was a prisoner in Bergen-Belsen from 11 January 1944 (when he arrived on a transport from Westerbork) to 10 April 1945; fascinatingly, the translator arrived on the same transport and also left Bergen-Belsen on the same day as Herzberg. Because Santcross was interned in the same camp as Herzberg, he possessed special insight into the diary as he translated it.

Abel Herzberg was a lawyer and a writer (in 1974 he received the Dutch prize for literature); his excellent education and writing ability account for the high quality of this diary, which is very insightful, thought-provoking, and analytical. Herzberg's diary is valuable because it provides a descriptive account of daily life in Bergen-Belsen from 11 August 1944 (when he began the diary) to 26 April 1945. He secretly maintained this diary during his internment in the concentration camp. This fact distinguishes his book from those of other diarists who wrote their histories after their liberation. Herzberg's work possesses a sense of immediacy that the other diaries (excellent as

they are) do not contain. Herzberg writes about actions as they happen! For instance, this Bergen-Belsen prisoner writes about a sudden general roll call, and he, along with other inmates, ponders about the situation. Some speculate about a transport; others hope for an extra ration of cheese; optimists predict that the war has ended. But few answers are to be found. Herzberg learns that the roll call has occurred because a prisoner has been sentenced to four weeks in the bunker for stealing shoes from the warehouse. The confusion of the prisoners is illuminating, for it manifests the lack of information in the camps, how the Nazis skillfully empowered themselves and simultaneously weakened the Jews by keeping them ignorant regarding what was happening.

Herzberg discusses the concomitant proliferation of rumors in Bergen-Belsen and the unreliability of many of them. Some prisoners continuously circulate rumors about the end of the war and their impending liberation while others dismiss these rumors as being unfounded. Realizing that the quality of his diary would suffer if he revised it after his liberation, Herzberg refrained

from making any alterations; the reader, therefore, learns what goes on in the mind of a concentration camp prisoner as he endures his manifold hardships and as he witnesses atrocities inflicted upon other inmates.

The diarist manifests to the reader the inmates' preoccupation with food, which was inevitable considering the meager portions of soup, turnip, onions, carrots, bread, and jam that the prisoners received. Herzberg often emphasizes his points by employing repetition. For instance, he says, "The food is abominable. Turnips, with I know not what kind of leaf. Everything is underdone and unpalatable. We struggle through it courageously. An hour after we have eaten, we are hungry again--hunger, hunger" (p. 8).

Herzberg does not merely provide descriptions of life in Bergen-Belsen; he also includes insightful commentary and analysis. He talks movingly and poignantly about the deaths of the elderly prisoners who live in the Altersheim (old people's home) and the indifference of the huge Nazi guard who yells at the Jews who place the dead bodies from the Altersheim into coffins and remove them. In this instance, and throughout the book, Herzberg juxtaposes the suffering of the Jews and the cruelty of the Nazis--which accounts in part for the title, *Between Two Streams*. Herzberg also discusses in great depth the Jewish Judicial Council that existed in Bergen-Belsen. The diarist tells of prisoners stealing bread from one another and physically attacking one another. Herzberg's despair and bitterness in Bergen-Belsen is compounded by the fact that he and his wife (Thea) were originally privileged Jews (there were 172 of them) who were placed in the "Sternlager"--the barracks in the camp where inmates were treated well and spared from work because they were supposed to be exchanged for German civilians and relocated to Palestine. For some reason that Herzberg never discovered, they were removed from the Sternlager after five weeks and transformed into regular prisoners. But despite

his despair and his questioning of his faith, Herzberg realizes that he must be grateful that he is still alive. He remarks at one point, "One will hardly know life if one has not experienced what we have experienced this morning: the transportation of 120 Jews from this misery to another misery, a misery of which nothing is known except that it is greater than ours" (p. 140). On a few occasions, the diarist manifests how death affects the lives of the other prisoners. He mentions that after a prisoner in the camp dies, others desire his trousers, glasses, and so on (p. 151). Although Herzberg describes their actions, he is careful not to judge his fellow prisoners because the conditions in Bergen-Belsen are so atrocious and the people are so desperate.

Abel J. Herzberg's diary is very powerful and illuminating, a significant book for anyone interesting in life in Bergen-Belsen. But the book teaches the reader a great deal about daily life in any given concentration camp. *Between Two Streams* also provides valuable insight into the state-of-mind of the inmates, how they dealt with adversity and hardships. It is straightforward, informative, and provocative.

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