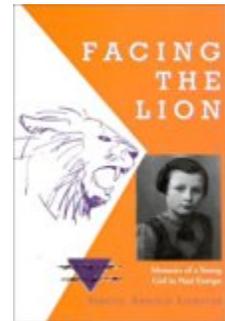


H-Net Reviews

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Simone Arnold Liebster. *Facing the Lion: Memoirs of a Young Girl in Nazi Europe*. New Orleans: Grammaton Press, 2000. x + 369 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9679366-5-9.

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Reflections on the Past: Remembering Nazi Oppression

Reflections on the Past: Remembering Nazi Oppression

This book tells the story of the author as a young girl living in Alsace-Lorraine when World War Two began and the National Socialists occupied this area. The memoir traces events from June of 1943 through June of 1945, and then briefly summarizes the main events in the author's life after 1945.

The author, Simone Arnold Liebster, has two main themes. The first theme is the religious conversion of her immediate family. They became *Bibelforscher* or Jehovah's Witnesses, causing a rift between the immediate and the extended family who were Catholic. Simone Liebster was also ridiculed and ostracized by her classmates. The second theme is the persecution of her immediate family by the National Socialists, who demanded that they denounce their faith and swear loyalty to Adolph Hitler and the German State. The author begins with a brief description of life prior to occupation, the conversion of the family, and the ensuing family turmoil. The focus then shifts to the dread surrounding the approaching conflict and the divisions caused between family members, some of whom support France and some of whom support Germany. The book then describes the Nazi occupation of Alsace-Lorraine and its impact upon the family. Because they were Jehovah's Witnesses and refused to acknowledge or respond to the Heil Hitler salute they are persecuted.

The initial consequences of their remaining true to their religious conviction were the transfer of Simone

Liebster from the advanced to the remedial school and the imprisonment of her father who was then transferred from prison to a concentration camp. The author herself is taken into "protective custody," in order to remove her from the corruptive influence of her parents, and turn her into a loyal and productive German citizen. Simone Liebster was accompanied by her mother on the trip to a youth detention center in Germany. Her mother was then arrested, after she returned to their home in Alsace-Lorraine. Simone Liebster describes how difficult it was to adjust to the harsh life in the detention center. She was initially able to continue reading a Bible she had smuggled into the center and to receive some news from the outside. Her experiences, however, include brutal treatment as well as policies designed to break her will and compel her to conform to National Socialist standards. The book does not end upon her release, but tells what happened to her after her release in 1945 whereupon she returned to Alsace-Lorraine. It concludes by summarizing key events in her life such as her later trip to the United States and her subsequent marriage.

The strength of this book lies in the fact that the author is able to effectively convey the despair that accompanied the complete disruption of her life along with the separation from her family and everyone to whom she was close. Furthermore, stories about the persecution and death of individuals who were gypsies, homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses are fewer in number; thus, this memoir supplements the knowledge regarding the impact of the National Socialist policies of terror and persecution. The weaknesses of the book, however, outweigh

its strengths. The style and format of the book fundamentally weaken it, as well as make some parts rather confusing. There are a number of grammatical errors such as the omission of words, run-on sentences, and fragments. The book is arranged as a series of recollections, under the headings of the month and the year, and not as a story. While this may increase the accuracy of the account, the result is a series of frequent, sudden shifts to a different day or a different event without any transitions or other attempts to orient the reader. Although the author has carried out some research and provided copies of the letters written by her parents, she does not provide any citations for most of the historical "facts" or assessments contained in the book. The attempts to provide historical background, as well as to analyze Nazi policy, are not always accurate. For example, in a note she states that "in 1870, led by Bismarck, Germany invaded Alsace, and Alsace became German" (p. 98). Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian chancellor, did provoke the Franco-Prussian War that resulted in a German victory and the transfer of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany, but he did not lead the German force that invaded Alsace. He was also adamantly opposed to the annexation of these territories, which were annexed by the King despite Bismarck's objections on the grounds that it would permanently embitter the French. Therefore, he cannot be said to have led this action either literally or figuratively. While I use this example from the earlier period, there are a number of similar problems with the "facts" presented regarding the National Socialist Party and their activities.

The drawings and photographs were a nice addition and lend more to the impact of this story than the descriptions that are often inadequate to achieve the desired ef-

fect. For example, the author states that she was unhappy to move to the city from the country, in part, because in the city "even the flowers on the balcony were prisoners of their pots" (p. 6)! While these may have been the terms in which the author thought as a child, they do not effectively convey her emotions or create images for the reader. Also, while the story is written from the perspective of Simone Liebster as a child, it clearly also reflects the judgments and views that she formed later and is thus uneven. Complex assessments of Nazi policy and the psychological impact upon those who were persecuted are juxtaposed with the simple views and memories of a young girl.

Her story is both significantly different and fundamentally similar to the experiences of other individuals who suffered under Hitler and the Nazi regime. On the one hand, the author is separated from her loved ones and brutalized, and the entire course of her life is altered as is the case with many victims of Nazi policies. On the other hand, because it is her religious views and not her racial purity that is the cause of her persecution and because she is a relatively young child, her treatment and experience under Nazi oppression is different. She is sent to a detention camp and not a concentration camp and is repeatedly given the opportunity to renounce her religion, swear loyalty to Hitler, and be released from the youth center. Anyone who has an interest in the personal experiences of those who lived at the time would benefit from reading this memoir. However, I would not recommend using this book in undergraduate or graduate classes due to the lack of documentation, the problematic historical facts and interpretations, and the lack of a coherent and compelling narrative.

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