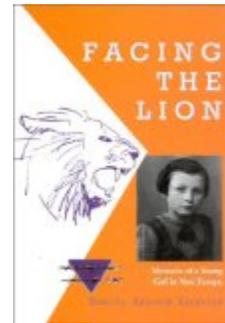


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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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## Memoir of Resistance: Jehovah's Witnesses and the Nazi Regime

Memoir of Resistance: Jehovah's Witnesses and the Nazi Regime

For anyone thinking seriously about the history of the Nazi occupation of Europe and the Holocaust, a single haunting question will most certainly occur: Would I have resisted? *Facing the Lion* (lion referring to the code word used by Jehovah's Witnesses for the Nazi regime) is the memoir of a girl and her family who could definitively answer "yes" to that question. The story of her refusal to submit offers valuable insight into the character of a person willing to stand up against a seemingly all-powerful political state.

Liebster's book chronicles the period from her childhood in the early 1930's through the German invasion and defeat of France, the ensuing struggle of her family to survive the Nazi reign of terror, the end of the war and their attempt to restart their lives. The final chapter of the book describes her life up until the present.

Simone Arnold (her maiden name) was ten in 1940 at the time of the fall of Paris, which was swiftly followed by the occupation of the hotly disputed Alsace-Lorraine region where she lived. The Arnold family had converted to the sect of Jehovah's Witness in 1937, a group proscribed under German law. While the Nazis were ideologically opposed to all forms of Christianity, they maintained uneasy relationships with the Protestant and Catholic churches. The Jehovah's Witnesses ("Bibelforscher"), however, were singled out due to their refusal to recognize the sovereignty of the state, to salute or swear oaths of allegiance to Hitler, to attend political

rallies or to serve in the military. As a result, 10,000 were imprisoned and 2000 interred in concentration camps, of whom at least half were murdered.

The lives of the Arnold family were made difficult even before the war in the conservative town of Mulhouse due to their religious beliefs. They were ostracized by their neighbors and even by some members of their family. With the German occupation, however, their lives were soon in danger. Jehovah's Witnesses were formally banned by the Nazis in 1938 and denied the right to free speech and assembly. The Arnold family remained involved in their church after the Nazi occupation, participating in underground meetings and smuggling literature across the Swiss border. As pressure increased, Simone's father Adolphe lost his job and the family bank account was closed by the Gestapo. Finally, in the fall of 1941, Adolphe was arrested and sent to Dachau concentration camp.

Meanwhile, Simone felt the pressure to conform to the newly Nazified school system. Her refusal to give the "Heil Hitler" salute or to join the Bund Deutscher Mädchen (BDM), the Nazi youth group for girls, resulted in her being sent to the Wessenberg Reformatory for Girls in Germany. Shortly after, in September 1943, Simone's mother was sent to Shirmeck concentration camp. Simone's life at the reformatory consisted of soul destroying hard labour, semi-starvation, and unpredictable punishment, all designed to break her spirit and lead her to renounce her religious beliefs.

The last part of the memoir describes the reunion of

the Arnold family after the war. Miraculously, all three survived, but Liebster makes clear that it took many years for them to overcome the physical and mental effects of their wartime experiences. Adolphe Arnold's health was severely compromised and he was unable to return to work, while all three family members experienced difficulties adapting to normal life. Liebster describes how the family would stand at crosswalks waiting for orders to walk, or jump at the sound of boots on the stairs.

Chapter 15, entitled "Vengeance or Forgiveness," is a particularly poignant one. Directly after the war, victims of the Nazi regime were given the opportunity to sign for the arrest of those who had denounced them to the Gestapo. In the Arnolds' case those responsible were the Catholic parish priest, the Protestant pastor, and neighbors in their apartment complex. To Simone's anger and disbelief, her mother refused to seek revenge stating that "vengeance belongs only to God." In this chapter, Simone's mixed emotions of anger and admiration reflect those of the reader.

The final chapter of the work describes Simone Arnold Liebster's life up to the present. Liebster makes it clear that her struggle to overcome the legacy of her experiences was not an easy one, and manifested as a lack of ambition and extreme shyness. She continued to be a devout Jehovah's Witness and eventually moved to the United States where she married Max Liebster, a Holocaust survivor, in 1956.

*Facing the Lion* is replete with excellent and relevant photographs and pencil drawings by the author. The appendices contain maps, letters written by the Arnold family while interred, examples of Nazi textbooks studied by Simone, and a sample of the Nazi declaration of their renunciation of faith. This form, if signed, allowed any Jehovah's Witness to be immediately released from internment. Simone and her mother and father had all refused to sign this form on many occasions.

Simone Liebster's memoir is a valuable addition to firsthand accounts of resistance to the Nazi regime. *Facing the Lion* is part of an effort by the Cercle European des

temoins de Jehovah Anciens Deportees to document the lives of Jehovah's Witnesses who defied the Nazi regime. The book starts slowly, with too much time spent in the depiction of the author's idyllic early childhood, but this is a small flaw in relation to the overall quality of the work. The work provides important information about the fate of Jehovah's Witnesses under German occupation, of which historians have written very little, and as a personal memoir describes how Nazi oppression affected ordinary people. *Facing the Lion* is a form of social history that gives an added dimension to political histories of the time period. It allows us to understand the dynamics of a society under the most extreme pressure, and shows the spectrum of reaction by ordinary people.

*Facing the Lion* is particularly important as a study in the character of a person of conscience. Simone and the entire Arnold family were set apart from their society even before the war. Their commitment to God above state power, their pacifism and their willingness to question the standards of the time separated them from other members of their social group. Alsatian society is depicted as conformist and authoritarian, with little tolerance for difference of opinion or belief. Simone was raised in an open, intellectual environment where she was encouraged to question and to think for herself. She was also raised in an atmosphere free of racial prejudice. The authorities at Wessenberg sought to undo this training and instill in her the values of passivity, obedience and silence.

The personal faith of Simone Arnold Liebster infuses this book and she, as did other Jehovah's Witnesses, understood her experiences as a modern version of Daniel in the Lion's Den. Liebster includes a letter written by Marcel Sutter, a 24 year old Jehovah's Witness, hours before he was executed by the Nazis in 1943. In this letter he writes, "I ask you to be strong and courageous; do not cry, for I have conquered. I have finished the course and kept the faith." *Facing the Lion* shows that ordinary people did face up to and resist the evil of the Nazi regime. This reader is left to ponder whether (given the same choice) I, or my friends and neighbors, would have the courage to do the same.

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