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The Choice: Poland, 1939-1945



Synopsis

A Holocaust survivor's powerful story of escape and renewal. In 1980, at the age of fifty, Irene Eber returned to her father's hometown of Mielec, Poland, where she and her middle-class Jewish family had first gone in 1938 when they were expelled one evening from their home in Germany. Her journey back would unleash a lifetime's worth of memories, and the result is this extraordinary book. Eber re-creates life in wartime Mielec: the rivalries and opportunism, the acts of courage and generosity, the constant fear borne by the Jewish community, and the moment in 1942 when the Germans marched all of Mielec's Jews out of town and toward the death camps. And she reveals what was perhaps the defining decision of her life: when an opportunity arose for her to escape, Irene left, despite her father's desperate wish that the family stay together. Thus began her life-long journey toward reconciling her lifesaving grasp at freedom with her heartbreaking separation from her family, setting her on a path to self-acceptance. In describing her survivor's guilt, despair, and loss—and how she has managed to overcome them while still honoring her past—Irene Eber has made a significant and profoundly moving contribution to the literature of the Holocaust.

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Customer Reviews

When the Nazis marched into Mielec, Poland, Eber was a 10-year-old dreaming of romance and happy endings. Her world was punctured by the burning of the butcher shop filled with Jewish men. In this moving memoir, Eber, a scholar of East Asian studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, describes her life during WWII and after, and while she presents considerable historical information,

her story focuses on war's cruel ability to manipulate human emotions, and the devastating mark it leaves on the human psyche. While Eber's title seems to refer to her decision to escape and leave her family during the war against her father's wishes, her book chronicles the many choices in her lifelong journey of self-discovery: the decision to live though the Germans wanted her dead; to leave her newly reunited family following the war to pursue her dreams; to be proud of her Jewishness; to return to Poland at the age of 50 and come to terms with the fear and guilt that had shadowed her life. Eber describes how, living in California after the war, she attempted to conceal from others her "anxieties, compulsive behavior, strange phobias, fears and nightmares." Eber's book is a penetrating psychological analysis of how she learned to cope with the destructive forces that engulfed her young life. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Irene Eber is Louis Frieberg Professor of East Asian Studies (emeritus) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Senior Fellow at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute. She earned her Ph.D. in 1966 at Claremont Graduate University in California. She is the author or editor of six scholarly books on Chinese history and thought. She lives in Jerusalem.

A beautifully crafted, harrowing memoir of the author's girlhood in Poland and her survival during World War II.

I didn't expect to feel so moved by this book. The author put me in her place with her candid intimacy and telling of her life, her pain, her thoughts and her connections. I could not help to better know her!

Irene Eber is a remarkably good writer and consummate historian you met in the film "Shanghai Ghetto". Her autobiography of a family's transition from German middle class happiness to unspeakable horror is poignantly related in this highly readable narrative. It is the most touching glimpse of this appalling episode I have found to date.

Irene Eber first describes the idyllic life of herself and her family before the war. She focuses on the Jewish traditions and observances. She then talks about how the Germans entered her native Mielec in 1939, and burned the butcher shop, synagogue, and associated libraries with the men herded inside. She smelled the odor of burning wood and burning human flesh. In very early 1942,

the Mielec Jewish community was among the first to be shipped to the newly constructed death camps---in this case nearby Belzec. Other local Jews were sent to their deaths in Auschwitz. Eber owes her life to at least two Polish families who aided and hid her--Korpantowa and Orlowsky [Orlowski?]. At one point, she and several other Jews hid behind a wall while the Germans and their dogs were searching only a few feet away. The slightest noise would have doomed them. Although she had a largely Aryan appearance, Eber feared being recognized as a fugitive Jew, not only by Poles but also by Jews. In fact, part of her family was denounced by one or more Jews, as she relates: "I learned recently that in this camp were three brothers (or was it only one?) named Kaplan, who were Gestapo informers. They were free to come and go as they pleased, using their freedom not only to betray Jews sheltered by Poles in the vicinity of Mielec, but also to give away anyone who had come into the camp illegally. I don't know if they did it to ingratiate themselves with the Germans, hoping thereby to save their own skins. Was it malice, or personal grudges against people from Mielec that they had known? Whatever the reason, it was a Kaplan who informed the Germans about the three tired fugitives in the barracks. Father, Aunt Feige, and Cousin Esther were apparently shot in the camp but not made to dig their graves. The bodies of the three were left to lie where they had fallen for all to see when they returned from their day of hard labor. Later they were buried in the forest surrounding the camp. To this day somewhere in a forest near Mielec in an unmarked grave are the remains, as are the bones of many other victims of the Kaplans and the Germans." (p. 130). After the war, Eber was surprised to learn that she was not the only Jew from Mielec who survived the war. She effortlessly switched from a Jewish religious to partly Christian to Jewish secular identity. Parts of her book include her recollections and reflections while living in Israel. She visited Poland in 1980, and quickly observed what had changed and what had remained the same since before WWII. The author mentions Krakow and its architecture several times. She recounts how the Flemish tapestries had been evacuated down-river during the 1939 War, taken successively to France, England, and Canada, and not returned to Poland until 1961.

"The Choice: Poland, 1939-1945" by Irene Eber, is a woman's story of the destruction of her family, her community, and her way of life after the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939. Ms. Eber tells her story in waves--not just a consecutive narration of events--and includes visits back to some of the places from her past after a gap of over 40 years. The part that I found most thought-provoking was the lack of anger on her part--her story is told more as a quest to understand, honor, and let go. Her observations on humans and their loss of humanity at times were what kept me turning the pages. An uneven book, but thought-provoking.

Ms. Eber is able to take you right into the horrors she faced, both as a child and as an adult. She's unflinching in her own self-examination as well as in recounting the events she witnessed. As a writer who struggles with capturing painful emotions and memories on paper, I have the utmost respect for this author's courage, not only for living, but for putting it all into words. She has a gift and we are fortunate that she's shared it with us. Namaste.

I was captivated by the author's courage as she tries to recreate with honesty, the events happening around her during the war. Although she can sometimes see only colors or shapes, she doesn't fill in what might have happened, only what she can remember. It was a joy to read of her family's reunion in a honest way, without celebratory prose. What a view she creates of the real-life drama in sometimes a matter-of-fact way. She neither paints herself as heroic or courageous, just as a girl trying to live against terrible odds.

I was impressed with the author's descriptions of the lives led by Jews in Poland prior to and during WW II. In that respect the book is well written, however there is a big missing piece. What is missing is the story of the escape from the German work camp and the ensuing two years in hiding. The author took us up to this point and then gave us no detail about the years in hiding or how she found the farm family that allowed her to hide in their chicken coop. The book had a tendency to be a bit long on philosophical observations with added poetry and short on narrative story. Much was left out as she skipped around from 1939 to present.

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