

*I Want You to Know We're Still Here: A Post-Holocaust Memoir*. Esther Safran Foer. New York: Random House, 2020. 231 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9780525575986.

*Inge's War: A German Woman's Story of Family, Secrets, and Survival under Hitler*. Svenja O'Donnell. New York: Viking, 2020. vii-xiv + 303 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781984880215.

Dusty and forgotten roads in Ukraine. A German cemetery in Denmark. With the authors re-tracing their relatives' journeys during the Second World War and the Holocaust, these memoirs each seek understanding on a familial as well as on a macro-level. The search for place and identity frame both memoirs. As they explore the spaces once lived in and traveled through by parents, grandparents, and other relatives, these authors explain the process of learning their own heritage. They tell multiple stories at once. The story of excavation: an often-halting process of uncovering the past, as relatives were reluctant to speak openly about what the war and the Holocaust had wrought or who died before the authors had a chance to ask questions. The story of preservation: how meticulously piecing together the stories of the past with the present enables them to safeguard their family history for future generations. The story of reflection: how processing these memories helps them to understand both their relatives and themselves. And yet, although these memoirs both trace experiences during the same time and place, the frames in which they lie is not the same.

Svenja O'Donnell's grandmother, Inge Wiegandt, was born into an affluent family in Kaliningrad (Königsberg) and experienced relatively few hardships, like many Germans, until the waning months of the war. With Wiegandt's harrowing flight westward, ahead of the Soviet invasion in January 1945, the intensification of her wartime suffering began. Esther Foer's parents and their families experienced the ferocity of the *Einsatzgruppen* and ghettoization as these mobile killing squads moved eastward in the summer of 1941, following in the wake of the Wehrmacht's invasion of the USSR and then the terror of existing in a world that saw them as less than human. The war's end brought additional struggles: the search for surviving family members, the recreation of a life from essentially nothing, and the question of where to build anew.

For scholars of the Holocaust, Foer's memoir unearths yet another layer, one that examines the interplay between memory and trauma as the second and third generations write to ensure that the past is not forgotten. This obligation has greater urgency as the time when survivors are no longer with us fast approaches. Foer subtitles her book "A Post-Holocaust Memoir," drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory." As explained in *The Generation of Postmemory*, it combines memories related by the generation who lived through the events, with the process of understanding them, buttressing them with additional documentation, and then sharing them with not only the author's generation, but also those that follow. As Victoria Aarons and Alan Berger explain in their work, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation*, second generation (children of survivors) are witnesses to memory, whereas third generation (grandchildren) act as custodians of the past.

For scholars of German expellees, the additional layer is about how the experiences of those who fled westward, either as the Soviet Army invaded or due to the Potsdam Agreement which allowed their expulsion from Eastern Europe, have been remembered and commemorated.

Despite claims to the contrary, the expellee story was neither ignored nor silenced after the war, as the mammoth expellee project, headed by Professor Theodor Schieder that resulted in the publication of a multi-volume series, attests. As both Bill Niven and Jenny Wüstenberg have explained, the German assertion of having been silenced is part of the process of claiming victimization, which then makes their own suffering acceptable to discuss. O'Donnell herself wrestled with this as she knelt by a German child's grave in Denmark saying, on page 189, "I'm still not sure what moved me most, this sudden grief or the fact that I was ashamed of it; that it felt wrong, even after so many years, to cry for any German, even a child, in a Second World War graveyard." It has, however, been utilized at times by revisionists seeking to reduce the focus on Germans as perpetrators and Jews as victims by highlighting German suffering, often without appropriate and complete context. The Soviet Army's invasion of Germany and its brutal treatment of German civilians cannot be unhooked from the German invasion first of Poland and then of the USSR with its genocidal march eastward.

Gender powerfully influences both memoirs. O'Donnell writes about the story of her maternal grandmother originally from East Prussia. Esther Safran Foer tells the story of both her parents, Jews from eastern Poland (now Ukraine), but her mother shapes the story in ways that her father, who committed suicide when she was eight, cannot. It is not, however, just a matter of female authorship, storytelling, and presence. It is also about how women navigated the war, genocide, and the postwar period, with fears of sexual violence, pregnancy resulting from rape, expectations about sexual bartering, and dealing for decades with the repercussions of these. As the scholarship of Atina Grossmann, Annette Timm, and Regina Mühlhäuser, among many others, has demonstrated, these realities shaped women's experience of this genocidal war and its aftermaths. The women in these memoirs made fundamental decisions about working, education, marriage, immigration, and children. It is also about why women, in the second or third generation, are the ones seeking to connect their family members across generations, telling a story that is about them and their search, but ultimately about the larger, familial narrative.

In *Inge's War*, the story is of a longer durée than just 1939-1945, discussing life prior to the invasion of Poland and stretching into the postwar period, as Wiegandt rebuilt her life, met with the father (Wolfgang) of her first child, and married (Horst). During the early years of the war, she lived in Berlin, experiencing far greater freedom than she had at home, living relatively carefree at first, underscoring how the war impacted the home front differently, depending on one's "race," social standing, geographic place, and stage of the war itself. After becoming pregnant, her beloved's father rejected their plans to marry, and she returned to her childhood home. In late January 1945, along with hundreds of thousands of East Prussians, Inge, her young daughter (the author's mother), and her parents boarded the vessel *Göttingen*, escaping westward. She saw the wreckage of the *Gustloff*, also carrying thousands of German refugees, after three Soviet torpedoes sunk it, a story that re-emerged with the publication of Günter Grass's *Crabwalk* in 2002. From several months in 1945, she and her family lived in temporary housing in Denmark; first in barracks, then a school, before finally ending up in the home of a local resident. They left Denmark in the fall, sneaking over the border into Germany. Her initial time there was precarious economi-

cally and socially, as it was for many expellees, often seen as one more burden on a geographically shrunken, over-populated, resource-strapped nation.

There are some historical simplifications important to note. On page 38, O'Donnell states that "three or more Jewish grandparents" became the measure of one's "Jewishness" under the Nuremberg Laws. This was the standard for the Third Reich to mark someone as a "Full Jew." However, Germans with one or two Jewish grandparents also fell under the Nuremberg Laws as *Mischlinge*, denoted as "half-Jews" or "quarter-Jews," and, therefore, also no longer citizens. On page 116, she writes of "the silence of shame that followed in the post-war years," and on the next page, of the silent complicity of the entire nation. Yet, the Germans had firmly rejected the idea of collective guilt by late 1945 and they were not silent about what they had seen and done that contributed to the persecution and murder of millions of Jews and other Europeans. Unfortunately, she repeats the myth of "brainwashed" Germans on page 136 and again on 205. On page 203, she discusses the reliance of Germany on "imports from occupied countries" during the war, without clarifying that these were draconian, non-voluntary, and left citizens within those nations to starve. She refers to her grandmother "stateless" on page 171, a designation for those who were literally citizens of no state; her grandmother did not lose her citizenship when she fled East Prussia.

In *I Want You to Know We're Still Here*, Esther Safran Foer tells of discovering her parents', Ethel Bronstein's and Louis Safran's, past, both of whom survived the Holocaust, exploring the place where they grew up, and sharing her journey with her mother, as well as her children and grandchildren. Readers may be familiar some of her story, given the novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, written by her son. However, his novel is fiction with some familial knowledge and facts, whereas she builds her narrative from family memories, documents, photographs, maps, DNA searches, artifacts, reunions of survivors, research databases, and, most importantly, her journey to the countryside of Ukraine, in search of the shtetls Trochenbrod and Kolki.

Her father's story, especially the time he spent hidden by a Ukrainian family, is the more obscure of the two. Yet, as she explains on page 32, "Solving the mystery of the black-and-white photograph of my father and the family that hid him during the war, and of finding Trochenbrod-...--has been, for me, the way of finding my father." Her mother's story of survival, fleeing eastward and working her way across the USSR all the way to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and then back to Ukraine, contains fewer gaps, and yet both she and readers intuit untold elements of her story as well. She writes of her parents meeting at war's end in Lutsk, of their marriage in 1945, their survival tactics of using a delicatessen as a front for operating an underground currency conversion business, and their illegal journey into Germany in 1946. Foer freely discusses the flexible, and, at times, illegal elements of this story, beginning her memoir with why her birth certificate lists a fictitious date and place, and delving frankly into the black-market dealings that sustained her family, first in postwar Poland and then in the Displaced Persons' (DP) camp Ziegenhain in Germany. However, the role of UNRRA in her family's story in her explanation of the DP camp portion is missing. They immigrated to the United States in August of 1949, sponsored by the uncle of her mother's half-sister.

Her search is for understanding what her parents, each of who were the sole survivors of their families, endured, but also for information, however scant, about her half-sister and her father's first wife. About them, she lacks everything, possessing "not one detail, not a name, not a picture—not one piece of memory," as she explains on page 5. She is cognizant of how the war and the Holocaust shaped her parents' behavior, from the frugal use of coupons to the stockpiling of food in the pantry, to sneaking rolls from a restaurant into a purse. Her father carried burdens, too much for him to bear, leading to his suicide in 1954. These elements are reminiscent of how Art Spiegelman describes and explains his parents' behavior in *Maus*. The chapters that relate her journey through the countryside of Ukraine, seeking the four memorials and the descendants of the family who protected her father, echo those of Father DuBois, whose journeys are documented in *Holocaust by Bullets*, with whom she consulted.

Both memoirs are powerfully written, pulling the reader into the intertwined stories of past and present. They serve as excellent models of the family memoir, a genre that has grown in the past three decades. They also serve as examples for others of how to build one's own family history, especially those seeking information about obscured pasts.

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