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BOOK REVIEW

So beautiful and young, finding ways to survive

Running Through Fire How I Survived the Holocaust

By Zosia Goldberg, as told to Hilton Obenzinger

MERCURY HOUSE, 208 PAGES, \$15.95 PAPERBACK

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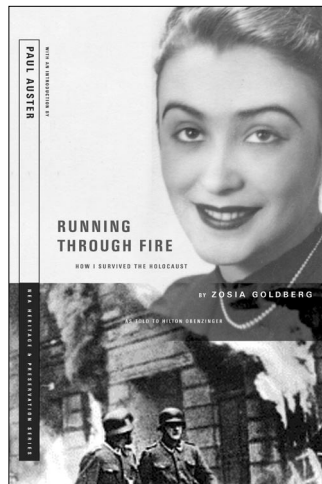
In a Holocaust memoir, the question being answered is “how”: how I escaped, how I survived, how I went on. Yet there exists another question that is equally pressing but impossible to answer. The question is “why.” Why did I survive when the others did not? *Running Through Fire*, the memoir of Zosia Goldberg, bears the subtitle “How I Survived the Holocaust.” She rarely asks why, only pausing on occasion to marvel at the odd mixture of luck and circumstance that allowed her to live.

When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, Zosia Goldberg was a 21-year-old urbanite accustomed to a carefree life. “We went out to the nightclubs and cafés. Life was just tremendous in Warsaw. Everybody lived like it was the last days of Pompeii.” Goldberg was one of a community of assimilated Jews who, for the most part, were fully integrated into secular society. Her father, Mieczyslaw Goldberg, was the highest-ranking Jewish civil servant of his time, highly respected and consistently mistaken for a Gentile. Photos of Zosia show a stunning, cultivated woman who, like her father, was often taken for a Gentile. “With my dark eyes and hair, I never heard that I was a Jew. They called me a Gypsy instead – admirably!”

This and the fact that Goldberg spoke Polish without a trace of a Yiddish accent – a telltale trait that condemned many Polish Jews – gave her an escape route of sorts. Once the fate of the Jews had become clear to her, Goldberg paid for herself and her mother (who survived the war separately from her daughter) to be smuggled from the Jewish to the Aryan ghetto. Once inside, both women assumed Gentile identities. On the advice of a friend, Zosia got herself arrested so that she would be sent,

along with the other young Poles, to Germany’s forced-labor camps. There she posed as a Polish-Ukrainian orphan, hiding her Jewish identity until the end of the war.

From the ghetto to the labor camps, it is virtually impossible to count the number of times Goldberg could have been killed. It is equally difficult to say how she escaped death each one of those times. Certainly, she was extremely lucky and possessed of bravery that bordered on recklessness. But she also understood human nature. Goldberg had an uncanny ability to instantly read people and situations and knew how to position herself in order to maximize her chances of survival. She recalls a brutal interrogation by the overseer of a Nazi labor camp. “You are not Polish! Who are you?”



He beat me without stopping.... All of a sudden, I reminded myself of what the Gentile engineer had advised me: Never admit anything if they beat you. As a matter of fact, if a German beats you up and you don’t fight back, that means that you are Jew, that you are scared. A Gentile always strikes back.”

Goldberg’s acute self-awareness extended to her charms, which played a softer yet vital role in her survival. As a young woman, Goldberg was never naive or coquettish, but fully aware of her appeal and the power it afforded her. She explains early on, “I was beautiful and very young. So

wherever I went they were always opening doors for me. I had this kind of luck. Wherever I went, I found help.”

Goldberg’s extraordinary story is made all the more powerful by her matter-of-fact delivery. *Running Through Fire* is an oral history, arguably the memoir in its purest form. The text is transcribed from several conversations between the subject and her nephew, the poet, critic and novelist Hilton Obenzinger, who initiated the project for the purpose of preserving his family history. (Later he was encouraged to pursue publication for a broader audience.) Obenzinger takes an unusual approach in chronicling his aunt’s story. Rather than including his observations as the interviewer in this testimony – descriptions of Goldberg’s storytelling manner, the multiple questions that surely saturate the original tape – he leaves himself out of the text entirely. The book reads as one continuous, unprompted monologue. Obenzinger notes in the preface, “I prodded some, but once she began to talk the problem was rarely faulty memory, but a rush of details, the confluence of so many sub-plots with the immensity of the brutality, ugliness, pain.”

In the context of the Holocaust memoir, the unvarnished expository style of oral history has particular impact. Goldberg’s story is immediate and relentless. From beginning to end, one horror is layered atop another with none of the opportunities for narrative buffers that a written memoir permits. She describes the Warsaw ghetto: “There were cadavers all over, their skin bursting open. They looked like lepers. They were covered with papers, smelling. Rats were eating them.” The unmitigated, “real time” aspect of the transcribed testimonial gives Goldberg’s story an artless veracity. The unique, unforgettable power that it imparts to her story, and to all stories of survival, is particularly important now that the public is said to tire of hearing yet another Holocaust tale.

Gabriella Gershenson is a food columnist and a critic in New York City.