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BOOK REVIEW

'Tell Me Another Morning' by Zdena Berger

A Holocaust survivor's autobiographical novel is reissued.

By Kai Maristed
Special to The Times

Among the genocides that smear the human record, the Nazi-engineered Holocaust still casts a particular aura of horror. Is that in part because of its sheer efficiency, paired with a general eerie absence of emotion, even of bloodlust? Despite the burden of war on two fronts, the machinery of the Final Solution managed to eliminate more than 6 million people — mainly Jews but also political opponents, Gypsies, homosexuals and other undesirables. However, the plan wasn't perfect. Not everybody died.

The German philosopher Theodor Adorno pronounced famously that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Nevertheless, from the Nuremberg trials to the present, there's been a keen demand for memoirs, fiction and movies based on survivors' stories. Those who survived are like the rest of us — and yet not. They suffered the inferno, were supposed to die and yet came back. The listener, in a reversal of survivor guilt, digs for an explanation of the mystery: Why did you survive? Was it sheer luck, plus an iron constitution? Or ruthless determination? Or hope? Prayer? Love?

Some survivors, for their part, feel driven to tell their stories. Zdena Berger, the author of "Tell Me Another Morning," first published in 1961 and now brought back by the non-profit Paris Press, explains in an interview posted at the publisher's website that she wrote her autobiographical novel to "make a truthful and powerful statement about the life in concentrations camps from the perspective of a teenage girl — which had not been done. I wanted to convey growing up in that atmosphere."

In so doing, she offers her own answer to the question of what made survival possible for women in the camps: friendship. The kind that lives in acts, not words, that surrenders a morsel of chocolate to a sick companion, that snatches away tainted water just in time, that drags along the one who fainted on the march. Friendship — how amazing to find it blooming in that world of the camps.

Don't be afraid to read this book. Although it contains harsh and disturbing images, it is not a victim's lament. It is not a sad story. Together, Tania, Eva and Ilse — the budding poet, the premature cynic and the lusty optimist — are the Three Musketeers of Theresienstadt. They find each other after the narrator, Tania, deported to the camp during the invasion, loses first her brother, then both parents. During the selection, her father was sent left to "the wire, the watchtower ... the flames of the chimney." When the mother elects to stay with him — she had been sent right, along with Tania — Tania reflected on their long love but also perceived, bitterly: "Through their lives they left the decisions to God and the authorities ... [now] I hear Mother make her first and final decision: 'I am going to stay with Father. Here.'"

But young Tania and her girlfriends couldn't stop the life force in them if they tried. They exult in the smell of pines, the perfume of bread, a shower that turns out to be ... a shower. They tease and quarrel and make up. They can be mordantly funny. But growing girls need more than a daily slice of bread and a bowl of watery soup. Berger chronicles hunger from its first in-dwelling as "the round light space in the middle of my body" to the near coma of advanced starvation.

It is the irrepressible Ilse who becomes the linchpin, parlaying her frank appetite for men into food for all three girls. Such brief scenes, with titles like "The Blue Pen," "The Loud Sky" and "The Louse," build this novel, the way images build to a poem.

Some elements of Tania/Zdena's experience are frustratingly generalized. Although clues are provided, places aren't named: not her native country nor city (Prague), nor the invaders and guards (termed "the green ones"), nor the dreary-scary succession of camps (Berger herself was sent on to Auschwitz, then Bergen-Belsen).

Tania's age also feels vague; at first apparently 12 at most, she marks a 20th birthday less than four years later, near war's end. Early chapters lose impact with lines that strain for effect ("I turn in the bed but the dark does not turn. It is solid and takes the room away.") However, as the three friends' journey into darkness progresses, Tania's language grows pure and strong in the best style of Hemingway — as molded by his Jewish, female mentor, Gertrude Stein.

To what degree does this story reflect Berger's personal experience? Perhaps it shouldn't matter. But as proved by recent debate over the veracity of certain "survivor" writers, it clearly does.

In her interview, Berger confronts the question head-on, concluding, "All events in the book are based on facts — some that I experienced and some that I witnessed. I did not make up anything." Indeed. "Tell Me Another Morning" is luminous yet modest, rooted in the last century's worst reality, yet

without rancor. Who could make up such miracles?

Kai Maristed is the author of the novels "Broken Ground" and "Out After Dark" and the story collection "Belong to Me."

Tell Me Another Morning

: An Autobiographical Novel

Zdena Berger

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