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Book review

“Holocaust to Resistance: My Journey”

- Reviews section -

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"Holocaust to Resistance: My Journey" by Suzanne Berliner Weiss, Roseway Publishing 2019.

Introduction

I have recently read several accounts by Jewish Holocaust survivors of their experiences during World War II and their subsequent efforts to come to terms with them. Alongside the book under review, these are:

“The River of Angry Dogs” by Mira Hamermesh is an account of her escape with her brother as a teenager from Nazi-occupied Poland, mainly on foot and arrival in Vilnius, Lithuania (then part of the Soviet Union). She managed to secure passage to Palestine under a US scheme, leaving just before the Nazi invasion of the USSR. The book includes an account of her subsequent life as a successful film-maker in Britain and Poland, until she was prevented from entering the latter after the Stalinist regime’s anti-semitic purges in 1968.

“Winter in the Morning” is Janina Bauman’s account of life as a young girl, with her mother and sister, inside the Warsaw Ghetto and their subsequent escape and survival on the “Aryan side”. She remained in Poland after the war, working in journalism and the film industry, but was also forced out by the anti-semitic campaign in 1968 and finally moved to Leeds.

Rose Cannan’s “In Paris we Sang” starts with an account of her youth as an impoverished Jew of Polish origin under the Nazi regime in Ludwigshafen, Germany. She gives a graphic description of her experience during Kristallnacht (now in Germany, less euphemistically called “Reichspogromnacht” – 7th November 1938). Rose finally managed to come to Britain with the Kindertransport, followed by her parents and brother. After a long period of near-destitution, she became a successful hairdresser under her first married name of Evansky and invented the “blow-dry”.

Finally, “Into the Arms of Strangers” edited by Mark Jonathan Harris and Deborah Oppenheimer (also made into a documentary film). This is a collection of memories of 16 people from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia who were sent to the UK on the Kindertransport. Most of them never saw their parents again.

Perhaps these books hold a particular appeal for me, for reasons that will become clearer later, but I think they also convey a general lesson as well, of human courage and optimism in the face of terrible experiences. Of course, many people are going through similar struggles again and facing the same obstacles – closed borders, racism and destitution: a situation now exacerbated by the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. Current struggles make accounts of the refugee experience before, during and after the war years just as relevant as ever.

“Holocaust to Resistance” differs from the above books in two respects. Firstly, Suzanne Weiss was too young to recollect – and certainly to understand – most of her experiences of the war years, so one of the strands of the book is a journey of rediscovery of her past as a Jewish girl born in Paris in 1941. The second strand recounts her life as a political activist, including over 25 years as a member of the Socialist Workers’ Party (USA – no relation to the British SWP). Although many Jewish holocaust survivors have developed left-wing views as a result of their experiences and used them as a guide in their working lives, a memoir from an activist in a far-left political group or “party” is different.

A life of political activism

In 1958, aged 17, having moved with her adoptive mother to the Los Angeles, Suzanne came to political activism through her interest in the struggle of African Americans against racism and for civil rights. She soon encountered the Socialist Workers' Party and joined its youth wing. The SWP was about to enter a decade or so of growing political influence, after the witch-hunts of the McCarthy period. The party brought with it a number of people seasoned in the workers' struggles of the 1930s, the war period and its immediate aftermath. Its history in the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, meant that it was able to draw on experiences wider than just the USA to inform its activity.

The SWP was thus well-placed to launch itself into the campaigns in solidarity with the Cuban revolution, the civil rights movement (particularly its radical wing around Malcolm X), the women's liberation movement and the campaign for the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam. Suzanne gives a lively account of her involvement in these movements, starting with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. The FPCC nationally had 7,000 members in 40 branches and was effective enough to induce reactionary Cuban exile forces to attack a big meeting in Los Angeles, including using firearms, an event that Suzanne witnessed. It also responded to the reactionaries' invasion of Cuba in 1961 (the Bay of Pigs), with nationwide demonstrations, including 5,000 in New York. Suzanne's visit to Cuba in 1960 strengthened her commitment to the revolution. The sense of liberation, radicalism and enthusiasm and the significance of the measures already introduced by the revolutionary regime clearly made an impression on the 19-year-old.

There followed further years of solidarity work, for the civil rights movement – particularly its radical wing around Malcolm X – and the Vietnam war, where an account is given of the debates in the movement. These show the significance of the movement finally adopting the SWP's position of opposition to US aggression, encapsulated in the call to withdraw US troops, rather than the Communist Party's call for negotiations or Student for a Democratic Society's approach – advocating multi-issue campaign.

After nearly a decade helping to build and run the SWP's print shop in New York and then acting as PA to James P Cannon (the co-founder of the SWP in the 1920's) in his final years, Suzanne moved to New Orleans in 1975, doing various manual jobs in industry. A real sense of the difficulty of being a woman (and a Jew) in the environment emerges. Civil Rights legislation and the Equal Rights Amendment resulted in more black people and women coming into relatively well-paid union jobs, but in all her workplaces the atmosphere seems to have been rife with racism and sexism and Suzanne found most rapport with her black female co-workers. To compound the difficulties, she experienced two serious attempted sexual assaults in her flat in New Orleans.

Suzanne's individual “turn to industry” was soon replicated all over the country by the SWP. Productive union work in the public sector was squandered in favour of almost wholesale placing of members into debilitating jobs, often in locations with no history of struggle. She points out that this was undertaken just at the time the unions were in decline, illustrated in 1981 by their failure to fight Ronald Reagan's summary sacking of 11,000 air traffic controllers for going on strike. Several other SWP members joined her in her last job in the deep south. They helped her campaign for Congress in 1982 and seventy co-workers bought tickets to her rally, but none turned up. She points out:

“We had not linked up with the union's militant workers... during all my New Orleans years, we had not recruited a single worker”.

The SWP abandoned alternative party building strategies, such as joining coalitions in solidarity with the Nicaraguan revolution and the Solidarnosc movement in Poland (Suzanne visited both countries). The result was a denial of their and the class struggle's decline by the SWP leadership. This meant that when members raised questions, they were summarily expelled.

Suzanne gradually withdrew from the SWP and eventually moved to Canada with John Riddell (Canadian author and translator), who she met at the SWP's offices in 1984. There followed further years of activism and solidarity work: Venezuela, Palestine, Bolivia and against extractivism and climate change. She tells us that Evo Morales, left wing indigenous president of Bolivia from 2006 until his overthrow in a right-wing coup in 2019, told solidarity organisations in 2010 that they should refocus their attention to climate change, as the main danger facing Bolivia and the world. This now the main focus of her political activity.

A Jew investigates her past

In common with many Jews (including me) whose family experienced the Nazi period or the Holocaust, Suzanne Weiss was strongly affected by the emotional dislocation that engendered and wanted to discover her and their past. She sporadically pieced this together over a period of about 65 years. Threaded through the book is a fascinating story of her ancestry: left-wing Jews of Polish origin, who joined the French resistance. The book starts with her sanctuary from the ages of 2 to 4 with a Christian family in the Auvergne during the war and follows her stays in several Jewish-run orphanages – mainly in the Paris region – with some nearby-but-distant guardians who were friends of her father's.

At the age of 9, Suzanne was adopted by a well-off, left-wing, Jewish Bronx couple called Weiss, who proceeded to bring her up in a manner that you could say included episodes of coercive control. This included a period in her late teens where she sought sanctuary from her parents in a Salvation Army Hostel and was then detained in a Catholic girls' reformatory for refusing to live with her parents, after which she agreed to move with her mother to LA.

Suzanne gradually accumulated more information about her birth family and relatives, sometimes by “appropriating” letters and documents from the Weisses and always having to secure from them any correspondence from the people she located.

Suzanne eventually managed to find out what happened to her parents and other relatives. In a series of visits to France over the last 30 years, she has investigated the history of resistance and sanctuary during the Vichy years in the Auvergne region. Upwards of 10,000 Jews were protected from the murderous Pétain regime through Jewish organisations placing them with other, non-Jewish families, who were clearly taking great risks in taking them in. Often, these children were harboured so that their parents could take part in the resistance to Nazi occupation. There is no record of betrayal of any of these children in the Auvergne, which is a region noted for its support for the Resistance in the later years of the war. Over 75,000 French Jews – many of them refugees from Germany, who comprised about half the pre-war French Jewish population of 330,000 – were deported from Vichy France to the concentration camps in the East. About 2,000 survived.

Autobiography, human interest and politics

I spent a couple of weeks stuck for ideas about how to finish this review. Why do I find biography autobiography – even of people who are not necessarily left wing – so interesting? Surely, as a socialist, I should be reading works of historical analysis, seeing how the lessons of the past relate to the tasks of the future?

I could make a case for a personal interest. I could cite my Jewish family's own experiences in Nazi Germany, although they had the resources and foreign connections to all escape by July 1939. Or I could look at my political activism in the Fourth International, or my having worked in science and engineering (I read biographies related to them as well). There is something in that: I get glimmers of recognition when Suzanne says what she did with her reparation money, or discusses some of her experiences in the SWP.

“Holocaust to Resistance: My Journey”

But biography is more than that. It was brought home to me by an article on obituaries and their authors, an occupation in significantly greater demand in these times of SARS-COV-2. Reading about people's life experiences allows you to step away from historical abstractions and to consider how history impacts on them as individuals. It helps us stay in touch with our own humanity, as the article on obituaries says. So, thank you Suzanne, for writing a book that does exactly that.

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Source [Socialist Resistance](#).

Suzanne Weiss' blog can be read [here](#).

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