

*My Germany: A Jewish Writer Returns to the World His Parents Escaped*, by Lev Raphael. Madison, WI: Terrace-U of Wisconsin P, 2009, xi+210 pp.

Lev Raphael, in his memoir *My Germany: A Jewish Writer Returns to the World His Parents Escaped*, bravely undertakes an astonishing journey in which he confronts many of the demons that have preyed on his life since he was born. Both of his parents were Holocaust survivors. Their Germany was pure evil; it was the source of the venom that caused the murder of 6 million Jews, including 1.5 million children. Germany caused “the camps and killing squads that not only murdered dozens of my parents’ relatives but also poisoned their memories. Poisoned mine” (5). Germany was responsible for his mother’s slavery. She had been “one of three hundred Jewish women internees being transported from the particularly brutal concentration camp of Stutthof, on the Baltic coast twenty-one miles from Danzig, in sealed and stinking cattle cars” (3). She labored for Polte Fabrik, Germany’s largest munitions plant, located in Magdeburg, while the rest of her family was being tortured and annihilated.

The author, like most children of Holocaust survivors (the Second Generation), grew up despising anything German. Yet, to his own confused surprise, Raphael finds himself on a train to Magdeburg in eastern Germany sixty-one years later. He was on a book tour, scheduled to read from his previous novel, *The German Money*. The title refers to German reparations paid to some survivors. Although Raphael’s parents needed those checks, the money caused many mixed emotions. These feelings form the core of that book.

“My late mother was on a very different sort of train headed for Magdeburg,” he writes in *My Germany*. “My mother was a slave, considered subhuman by the very people whose language she spoke so perfectly that it might have saved her life (4).” Raphael, in stark contrast, “made the choice to come. To Germany—the country I had sworn never to visit” (4).

A gifted and eloquent writer, Lev Raphael makes it perfectly clear that deciding to make this trip, which was never to be enjoyable—just business—was painful and frightening. He has, in fact, been the first of the Second Generation writers to deal with the inherited trauma of the Holocaust; he has been publishing about the Second Generation since 1978—before Helen Epstein, before Art Spiegelman, among others. He speaks of the “German penumbra” (50), the struggle with rage of so many children of survivors, the sense “of being dwarfed by the parental past” (168). His parents’ suffering and his concomitant hatred of Germans shaped his entire life, including both his Jewish and gay identities. As a daughter of Holocaust survivors myself, I fully sympathize with Lev’s German phobias. I certainly grew up with a horror of anything German (or Polish, for that matter).

Raphael’s memoir reads like a mystery novel; he is, in fact, quite proficient in this genre, as he has published seven successful mysteries. After years of researching, he begins to unravel his mother’s history, learning painful details she had been unable to share with him. To his amazement, he unearths a Yiddish essay published

by a young Polish Bundist, Hela Klatshko, in Brussels after the war. Klatshko is his mother; she describes growing up in Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania, then being deported to Kaiserswald Riga, and then Stutthof. She describes hangings, Selections, hunger, forced labor, punishments, gassings, and the cry for revenge, “the last will and testament of those who perished” (34). He also discovers a distant relative still alive and living in Germany.

The book manages a constant tension between the author’s personal Holocaust history and his struggle to accept the genuinely friendly Germans who respect and honor him for being a critically acclaimed author. At no point is Raphael, who holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from Michigan State University, simplistic in his feelings. Yet by the time he hit the third stop on his first tour, in Göttingen, he started “to fully appreciate how surprisingly untraumatic it was to be in Germany” (159). He began to see that as “an exponent of American Jewish culture, wowing a German audience,” he was achieving “the grandest triumph I could imagine” (160). And at the end of his journey, he felt the drama and irony of being “rested, well fed, well treated, a seasoned reader and performer of my own work—on tour in the Germany I had spent a lifetime dreading and fearing” (170).

His second tour took him to Munich. Again, Raphael describes his associations, “typified by being stuck in traffic near a sign that pointed the way to Dachau.” Munich was the birthplace of the Nazi Party. The shameful Munich Agreement of 1938 “started the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, my father’s homeland. The coda to all this horror was the attack against Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics.” Nevertheless, writes Raphael, “it was with a sense of shock that I found myself falling in love with Munich” (175).

The search for his mother’s past concludes in Bad Arolson at the Red Cross’s International Tracing Service. Raphael gets to see and touch original documents that stir his imagination, one of which was his mother’s inventory card. He writes, “I seemed to see the endless piles of ordinary goods stolen from Jews at one camp after another, which were then cleaned, repaired, and redistributed throughout the Reich.” He pictures his mother, “hair shorn, missing three teeth, stripped of her home, her parents, perhaps even a husband—but still defiantly signing her name with elegance and dignity.” Raphael feels so faint “that I thought I was going to pass out” (190). First and foremost, however, he is a writer. “I knew,” he asserts, “sitting there, that I would have to write about it to understand what it was going to mean” (193).

Interwoven throughout this fascinating historical and spiritual journey, Raphael, the author of nineteen books, including *The German Money*, *Writing a Jewish Life*, and *Dancing on Tisha B’Av*, discusses many of his other works. He also speaks of coming out to his parents after forming a relationship with his beloved Gersh. (The one complaint I have about the text is the lack of an index. There are so many rich strands to follow, and an alphabetical listing would have been a great asset.)

By the conclusion of Lev Raphael’s moving and well-written account, he is transcendent. He is wisely able to differentiate the despicable Germans of the 1930s

and 1940s from contemporary Germans, who have treated him with kindness, respect, and warmth.

Once again, Lev Raphael has broken ground with new literary matter. I believe he is the first Jewish American writer to deal with the subject of reconciliation—not with the German past, which is totally unforgiveable and should never ever be forgotten—but with the ghosts and demons of that terrible past, which, for him at least, are no longer viable.

**Note:** Lev Raphael reads from the Prologue to *My Germany: A Jewish Writer Returns to the World His Parents Escaped* on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

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