Living in Two Worlds

This unique collection of diaries and letters offers a vivid personal account of the experiences of a Jewish couple living parallel lives during the Second World War. While their children left for England just before war broke out, and Siegfried soon followed, Else Behrend was unable to obtain her visa in time, and remained in Germany. This volume includes Else’s account of her years of persecution under the Nazi dictatorship, and of her life underground in Berlin, before her eventual daring escape to Switzerland on foot in 1944. Her dramatic story is presented alongside Siegfried’s account of his very different experience, living penniless and in isolation in England, as well as some of her letters to her close friend and confidante, Eva. Complemented by QR codes that allow readers to listen to Else’s own voice from her 1963 BBC interviews. Published in English for the first time, Living in Two Worlds offers an unforgettable and moving insight into the impact of the Second World War on everyday life.

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Living in Two Worlds
Diaries of a Jewish Couple in Germany and in Exile

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FOREWORD

Else Behrend-Rosenfeld (1891–1970) was a German teacher and social worker, half Jewish and married to a Jew. Siegfried Rosenfeld (1874–1947) was one of a small minority of people classified by the Nazis as Jewish who lived in Germany through the years of Hitler’s Third Reich (1933–1945), and survived to tell the tale. The fact that they brought up their children as Christians and did not themselves participate actively in the Jewish religious community offered the Rosenfelds little protection from discrimination and persecution.

Hitler and the Nazis believed that people of Jewish blood all over the world were innately inclined to engage in conspiracies and plots to undermine and ultimately destroy the German or ‘Aryan’ race. Hence they had to be removed. From the moment they came to power in 1933, the Nazis began to put pressure on Germany’s small Jewish community, roughly half a million people, to emigrate, dismissing them from their jobs and removing the economic basis of their existence. By the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, half of Germany’s Jews had emigrated, Siegfried Rosenfeld among them.

Those that remained had already been deprived of most of their rights and forced into an existence separate from that of the majority of ‘Aryans’. The Nazis’ antisemitism became increasingly radical during the war, which brought millions of Eastern European Jews under their control. In 1941 Hitler’s paranoid vision came to imagine a world-wide Jewish conspiracy behind Germany’s enemies, Britain, then the Soviet Union and finally the United States, and unleashed a campaign of extermination that left some 6 million European Jews dead by the middle of 1945.

The vast majority of ordinary Germans did nothing to prevent or protest against this unfolding campaign of hatred, discrimination and mass murder. Some were convinced by the antisemitic propaganda pumped out by the Nazi media and education system; some were intimidated by the Gestapo and the organs of the police state that made anyone who tried to help Jews liable to arrest and imprisonment: all, however, knew what was going on, and by the summer of 1942 at the latest were aware of the killing fields and extermination camps of the east, informed about them by soldiers and others who had witnessed or learned about them. After Germany’s defeat in 1945,
ordinary Germans had to come to terms with their collective guilt for what later became known as the Holocaust.

Despite this, small groups of Germans had tried to resist the Nazis. The best-known act of resistance was the attempt by a group of army officers to kill Hitler on 20 July 1944, an attempt that only failed because of chance circumstances. There were other resistance movements as well. The most important secret organisations were linked either to the extreme left Communist Party of Germany or to the moderate, left of centre Social Democrats, who had been the largest political party in Germany before the rise of the Nazis, in the early 1930s, and the mainstay of the democratic Weimar Republic, effectively ruling its largest federated state, Prussia, until 1932.

Both the Rosenfelds were active members of the Social Democratic Party until the Nazis banned it in 1933; Siegfried was a senior official in the Prussian administration but as a Social Democrat and a Jew was sacked by the Nazis soon after they came to power. Despite massive persecution by the Gestapo, small remnants of the party continued underground propaganda work against the regime, and it is to these that Else Behrend-Rosenfeld owed her survival, along with relatives and friends from her university days.

Else Behrend-Rosenfeld’s diaries and letters, gathered together for the first time in this book, give a detailed and often moving account of the discrimination and persecution to which she was subjected by the Nazis from 1933 until the end of the war. She recounts the verbal abuse and aggression to which she was subjected by Nazi officials, along with acts of spite and denunciation by ordinary Germans. But she also experienced many acts of kindness and consideration, which led her to doubt the justice of imposing the kind of blanket condemnation of collective guilt on the entire nation that her husband Siegfried, viewing events in the Reich from his British exile, clearly shared. The detail of her diaries enables us to observe the whole variety of attitudes and behaviour of ordinary, non-Jewish, non-Social Democratic Germans towards people like herself, much like that of another Jewish diarist who survived the Third Reich, the literature professor Victor Klemperer.

Perhaps she was lucky. In August 1942, as the mass extermination of Europe’s Jewish population by the Nazis was reaching its terrible climax, Else clearly reached the conclusion that her luck was running out, and went first to Berlin and subsequently to Freiburg, southern Germany, concealing her identity and living secretly with a series of courageous men and women who were willing to shelter her. She had entered an even smaller world, one
of which we still know relatively little, that of German Jews living underground. Eventually she was placed in the hands of people who engaged on a regular basis in the highly dangerous business of smuggling Jews and others across the Swiss border, and made her way to freedom.

Else Rosenfeld was a gifted writer, and her account of these events and experiences makes for gripping reading. It needs to be remembered, however, that many Jews who tried to live underground were caught and killed; those who survived were a tiny minority. Betrayal, denunciation and hostility were more common than loyalty, discretion and sympathy. Just as important were the experiences of Siegfried Rosenfeld in Britain, eking out a precarious existence in Oxford and then subjected to the privations of internment on the Isle of Man as an ‘enemy alien’. It is understandable that the story of Jewish-Germans living in exile from the Third Reich is usually told as a story of achievement, but there were many, like Siegfried, who were broken by the experience.

Richard Evans