

THE MERMAID AND THE MESSERSCHMITT:

War Through a Woman's Eyes, 1939-1940

by Rulka Langer

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How can I explain my fascination with the story of Warsaw during World War II? Yes, I'm half-Polish, but my family is not from the capital city, and no member of my immediate family suffered through the bloody September 1939 Siege of Warsaw. The Urbanskis didn't endure the subsequent horrendous years of Nazi occupation, nor the spectacularly disastrous Uprising of 1944, in which the city was leveled and upwards of a quarter of a million people perished.

I'm told it's human nature to distance oneself from pain and sorrow — most especially tragedy of unspeakable proportions. But I can't do it. Whenever I hear something, anything, about World War II — whenever the year 1939 is mentioned — my heart and mind automatically leap to Warsaw.

So when I learned of the recent re-release of a forgotten World War II classic, *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt: War Through a Woman's Eyes 1939-1940*, I had to get my hands on it. This memoir, written by Rulka Langer, a young, Polish career woman, did not disappoint. In fact, the narrative is so exquisitely rendered, built as it is upon a mountain of sharply observed details and trenchant insights into human nature, I could not put it down.

Polish pride, Polish brains and Polish bravery are all on display through the eyes of Langer, a 33-year-old, Vassar-educated employee of the Bank of Poland, who is also a wife, daughter, sister and mother of two. The book opens in the ominous month of August, as Poles on the home front are fighting a sense of foreboding about the looming war. Some are in denial. Others go on vacation. Most enter a preparedness mode: they stock up on flour, sugar, candles, and medicine. They carry gas masks. They dig trenches. Some just want the bloody thing to start, because the anticipation is killing them.

When War does break out on September 1, several days elapse before complete pandemonium erupts. As the Germans bomb the countryside and outskirts of the city — targeting not just military sites but civilians, including farmers and children, making clear their genocidal intentions — many Poles desperately head out to the countryside. Other Poles from the country side stream into the city.

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Langer decides to tough it out in the city she loves, the City of the Mermaid. There she lives with her elderly mother, a servant, and her eight-year-old son and three-year-old daughter. Once the bombing begins, the children start to play war, building cities from wooden blocks which are destroyed by aerial bombardment. Her son, George, even wishes to be wounded and excitedly points to a minor cut on his leg: "I'm wounded!"

One of the gifts of Langer's narrative is her unsparing, truthful description of herself and others. She admits to being so focused on survival — standing in line for horse meat or chocolate, galloping in fear through the streets as bombs fall — that she almost forgets about her husband in the States and her brother in the country. As the days progress, and the city loses water and power, she goes to a colleague's apartment in search of supplies. When she finds other articles her family may need and starts helping herself, her feelings about looting are forever changed.

"In war people show their true nature," she writes. "They are exactly what they are, nothing more, nothing less. All that war does is to dispel pretense."

Once the city has surrendered, Langer describes the cold reality of the Nazi occupation and her refusal to accept handouts (even her malnourished children refuse soup from the Germans). With her money running low, she turns entrepreneurial and quickly develops a surprisingly successful business printing advertising flyers. Once she makes up her mind to accept her husband's offer to leave Warsaw (interestingly, not an easy decision), her focus is on out-maneuvering the authorities and finding a way out of Poland.

"War is not only a chamber of horrors," she writes in an afterword to the book. "It is also the greatest personal experience any human being can go through.... Once you have been through it, you will be forever grateful to be alive.... I have always thought that the awareness of death would spoil the joy of living. But it does not. It only makes everyday troubles seem less important.... There is something comforting in this acceptance of death. Death is the supreme trump life holds against us. Once we have squarely faced it, it is no longer a menace lurking in the dark."

It is hard to explain, but reading Langer's account is in some way comforting, even uplifting. The reader feels as if she has squarely faced one of history's greatest infernos. When you finish, you feel inspired by how one remarkable woman responded to the darkest of dark hours.