



Book Brunch

"War Stories"

by

Lev Raphael

Posted May 15, 2011

Over a million Poles died in Auschwitz and many more were slaughtered by the Germans in other ways because Hitler had harsh plans for Poland as evil as those operating for the Jews. That's a story not well enough known in the West, as is the one told in *The Mermaid and the Messerschmidt*, a memoir originally published in English in 1942 by a Pole educated at Vassar.

Rulka Langer describes in plain but **riveting prose** what it was like to dread war coming and then to be caught up in the Blitzkrieg that led to the constant bombing of Warsaw, the hunger, panic, terror, thousands of deaths and then the closing iron fist of Nazi rule. Langer draws affectionate portraits of her large, haute bourgeois family gathered in well-upholstered apartments or country homes over newspapers and around radios that issued ominous forecasts in the run-up to war. Reading the dread-soaked pages, it's hard not to think that these same people, or their families, had lived through another terrible war a little over two decades earlier. Here was a new threat, but far deadlier than what had come before.

With the war begun, Varsovians, as they're called, can't believe that England and France won't somehow come to their rescue, or that Warsaw itself won't somehow manage to withstand a siege, but the noose tightens and hope dies. Gradually the world turns upside down and inside out, literally, as bombed apartment blocks expose their interiors as do dead soldiers and even horses that are quickly stripped of their flesh in a city growing hungrier by the day.

We see all this through the eyes of a woman who was both mother and daughter, worried about defending her children from every possible threat and trying her desperate best to support and aid her mother. But before Warsaw surrenders, she has experienced being bombed, losing relatives, almost being burned out of her home, and moral dilemmas most of us could never even imagine having to face, let alone resolve. She's **completely honest** in describing her sometimes crippling fear and her failings, which makes her courage and inventiveness all the more striking and commendable.

Langer was lucky enough to have a diplomat husband posted in the U.S. who was able to help her leave Poland with her two children before Germany and the U.S. were at war. The story of her tension-ridden exit is worth the price of the book itself. In its outline it may remind us of others books and even films, but it's uniquely hers. This new edition of Langer's memoir **comes with valuable maps and stunning contemporary photos of a great city being demolished by war.**

###