



**Saturday, August 14, 2010**

**Review of the Day: The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt**



Rulka Langer was visiting her family in Poland when Germany invaded in 1939, setting off World War II. Her husband was in America, where they had been living, but she had taken their two children back to Poland to visit her mother, her brother, and other relatives. She and her children

remained in Poland through the German siege of Warsaw, before finally escaping back to America in 1940.

Langer's account of the German invasion and siege was first published in 1942. *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt* has now been re-issued with fresh editing; more than a hundred new photographs, maps, and other supplemental documents; and a new Epilogue written by her son.

This is an incredible book. Subtitled "War Through a Woman's Eyes, 1939 – 1940," it reads like a novel, dragging the reader through the burning streets of Warsaw as German bombs drop on the city, on perilous train and cart trips through the war-scarred country-side, and through the treacherous and increasingly evil post-siege German administration. Her writing is crisp and honest – revealing her prior experience as a journalist.

Langer was not Jewish, and she left Warsaw before the Germans squeezed the city's Jewish population into the infamous Warsaw Ghetto, so this is not a book about the Holocaust. But her depictions of events such as the arbitrary arrest of teachers and Catholic priests, and refugees transported on cattle cars, provide, in retrospect, chilling clues about what was to come.

Hers is the story of what it was like for ordinary people to live through war, to make decisions and to carry on even when her world is being blown apart. Her descriptions and explanations can seem unrealistically chipper – such as her report of bringing her children and mother back to Warsaw after deciding they were in greater danger in the country – seeming to deny the emotions that must have gone into them. But some experiences cannot hide behind a brave face, such as watching the houses on either side burn, knowing there was no water to put out the fire should it spread to their house, or racing with her children to a bomb shelter while machine guns strafed the street on which they ran.

Although the subject matter is serious, this is still an entertaining book that is thoroughly absorbing and quick to read. Langer's memoir is a valuable historic account that deserves a wide audience.

## NOTES

*The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt* would make an excellent book club choice, especially for readers who enjoyed *Suite Francaise* by Irene Nemirovsky, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, or *Sarah's Key* by Tatiana de Rosnay.

I am pleased to scratch this one off my Guilt List. I just wish I hadn't waited so long to read it -- it was terrific!

The book is published by Aquila Polonica Publishing, "a young company specializing in publishing, in English, the Polish World War II experience – a part of World War II which is virtually unknown in the West. This amazingly heroic and tragic story of one of the Western Allies was suppressed for decades by the Communist regime that was forced upon Poland after the war, as part of its strategy for controlling that country. Only since the fall of Communism in 1989 have the true facts begun to resurface."

*Mermaid* won the 2010 Benjamin Franklin Silver Award for Best First Book (non-fiction).