WOMEN OF EXILE: German-Jewish Autobiographies Since 1933


Frieda Forman

Before I begin the review of Women of Exile: German Jewish Autobiographies Since 1933, I must introduce an autobiographical note of my own: I, too, was a Holocaust refugee during the Nazi era in Europe and the bond I feel with these women is therefore immediate, familial and profound.

In the excellent introduction to the book, the editor, Andreas Lixl-Purcell, states the significance of this collection of female memoirs: “In the simultaneity of affirmation and negation of tradition, these autobiographies force the reader back to the political questions of our own times. They restore the terrible truth — without glib catchwords and without reductive phrases — of what it means to be alive in this century.” Unlike other refugees who retain the hope of returning to their native land, the German-Jewish women of exile in this volume can never return: their former world has been shattered and has effectively ceased to exist for them.

Yet, because they survived the Holocaust in exile, rather than in the midst of the ultimate terror of Nazi concentration camps, their memoirs speak in voices that are familiar to us in their expression of grief, loss, bewilderment — but also of hope and expectation.

This is a book of memoirs, and memory is a central character, reflecting not only individual impulse, but the collective Jewish commandment to remember, to not forget. Many of the authors respond to the call of memory late in life: Else Gerstel, in the chapter entitled “Times Have Changed,” opens her remembrance with, “For you, my grandchildren, I am willing to put down, without any pretension, memories that flit through my head —

THE MEASURE OF MIRANDA


Isabel Waldman

I have had a fairly long history of involvement with Latin American solidarity groups, and so, when I began to read The Measure of Miranda, I believed I had heard all the shocking stories about fear and torture and hate in Latin America. I didn’t think I could have my head or heart opened in any new ways.

However, this powerful novel affected me greatly. The author, Sarah Murphy, draws together situations, which, although they seem to be different, have much in common. It seems that women share the experience of oppression no matter where they live, or what their social and economic position might be.

On one level the book is about Miranda, a young Canadian woman, the perfect 21 year old — beautiful, intelligent and graceful. Always protected from the world by her parents, who tell her, “No one will hurt you, no one means to hurt you …” (as long as you listen to us and keep your eyes closed to the reality of the world around you). Miranda’s parents live their lives as if they are characters in rerun T.V. soap operas, “...where the girl goes off to explore the world in technicolour and comes
back to family and apple pie and the boy
next door all happy to know the truth of
home, completely unchanged.

Miranda’s father is head of a subsidiary
of a large corporation, based in a Central
American country, probably El Salvador.
Her mother writes to her, telling her that,
of course, life is wonderful in this beauti-
ful country. They have a large and luxu-
rious house, many “happy” servants and
peasants, “Who are really different than
us, Miranda.”

But Miranda, living in Canada and at-
tending university, meets a group of people
who help her to see the realities that are
around her, the world so different from
what her parents wish her to see. She
moves into a commune with Jim, her
political science professor who has be-
come her lover. He wishes to “awaken”
her and liberate her from the mold her
parents have cast her in.

Miranda meets Amparo, a miraculous
woman, a Chilean political refugee, who
also lives in the house. It is through her
relationship with Amparo that Miranda is
truly awakened, not only to the truths of
the oppression, torture and fear that run
rampant in Latin America, but also to the
world around her, a world Miranda finds
increasingly intolerable.

I have a friend who was jailed and tor-
tured in Argentina — a beautiful, serene
woman, whose insight, gentleness and
unwavering political commitment have
always moved me deeply. For me, my
friend and Amparo are one and the same
person. Amparo goes through hell for her
commitment to change and to a better and
more humane world, and yet does not lose
her gentleness or political insight. She is
able to rise above cruelty and thoughtless-
ness and hate; to see beyond mere actions.

A special image I have of my Argen-
tinian friend, like a snapshot in my mind,
is of her serenely sitting in a sunny garden,
sewing and talking of her family in Ar-
gentina, her hands always busy. At one
point in the novel, Amparo, who is always
knitting, is asked at a student gathering
Jim is having in the garden, “Do you
always knit? ... I mean, don’t you have
work to do? I mean important work. Work
that’s more important?”

She is asked this strange question by a
“politically correct” student, one who felt
that she had to distance herself from such
mundane, unimportant, woman’s work.

“Important. Ay, I will tell you a story
about important.” And Amparo tells the
story of the man she lived with in Chile,
who “naturally” was the one with greater
political understanding, who knew what
important was. In their relationship
Amparo did the domestic duties for her
companiono (her man), cooking, cleaning,
knitting, woman’s work that kept the home
together and sustained him. But her man
(like the student who reproached her),
told her she should spend her time doing
“important” work; as if her work didn’t
nurture and make so many things possi-
able. Amparo’s strength and humanity
flowered and grew, and when finally there
was the “Nazi knock” on the door, and she
and her man were kidnapped, then impris-
oned and subjected to the ugliest tortures
imaginable, Amparo never lost her
strength and beliefs. She maintained a
dignified defiance towards her torturers.
She found a love and sisterhood with her
fellow prisoners and their children (who
were often thrown in prison with their
mothers, or born there).

But Amparo’s man was broken like a
small child. She tells them how the tort-
ures were too much for him and he finally
could not help but betray those he loved
and worked with. And so, one must ask,
what is important, what tasks and strengths
must we acquire in our lives?

Everyone in the room is silenced by
Amparo’s story, unable to move, espe-
cially Miranda. Miranda has seen Ampa-
ro’s pictures of the tortured mutilated
bodies of the victims of the oppression in
Chile. The tortured woman, lying dead,
with her baby, also dead, beside her. These
pictures are imprinted forever in Miranda’s
mind, and she is unable to leave them and
return to the world of her parents and their
suffocating comfort. Jim appears no dif-
f erent than her parents. He wished to
liberate her to his own reality and thus
control her in his way. She is a beautiful
object to him that he can use to enhance
himself.

If Amparo is an immigrant, a political
refugee learning to live and understand a
new country, Miranda is also an immi-
grant, a refugee suddenly thrust into a new
reality, into a world that all those who have
tried to control her have denied. It is only
through a final radical act of courage and
despair that Miranda is able to free herself
and the souls of the tortured women in
Amparo’s pictures.

The novel is written in a “stream of con-
sciousness,” ignoring many rules of gram-
mar and composition. Although this some-
times makes the story difficult to follow it
also adds to its great emotional impact.

Contrary to what Canadians believe,
Canada has not historically been a wel-
coming refuge for the world’s disposs-
sessed and oppressed. Barbara Roberts’
Whence They Came is a powerful and
important indictment of Canada’s im-
migration policy between 1900 and 1935.
The policy is distinguished not only by its
discriminatory and restrictive aspects, but
by the fervent, covert and often illegal
deportation practices carried on by its
administrators. The poor, the unemployed,
the disabled — and all those considered
political “agitators,” “reds,” or “trouble-
makers” — were victims of arbitrary
deportation practices decided upon by a
few government bureaucrats: de facto,
self-appointed judges operating in an
extralegal system. Parliament had little
control over and evidently little interest in

WHENCE THEY CAME:
Deportation from Canada
1900-1935

Barbara Roberts. Ottawa: University

Carol Greene