
Reviewed by Susan Landau-Chark, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

“The daughter of Holocaust survivors, Pearl Goodman grew up in Toronto in the 1960s.” I too grew up in Toronto in the 1960s and I was prepared to re-experience familiar landmarks and events through her “eyes.” My confession is made – I was coming to the book with expectations. Never a good idea. Like Pearl Goodman, I arrived as an immigrant child, though my parents were English Jews, and my parents’ immediate family was intact.

Pearl Goodman introduces her conflicts immediately to the reader when she describes herself as “grappling with what it meant to have lived in Toronto in the sixties.” While her physical home may have been located in Toronto, her emotional landscape was shaped by the traumatic experiences of her Polish Jewish parents. She learns to lead a double life, haunted at night by her parents’ nightmares, and haunted in the day by her inability to save her parents.

Goodman’s story is at times a little jumbled - it reads more like a series of flashbacks. Initially I found this a little jarring. For example, in describing one family who lived in the flat next door to her parents, she noted that she often went over to play with “Darlene, who was four years of age to my nine.” Several chapters later she is seven years old wearing Mary Jane shoes at her brother’s bar mitzvah. Shortly after this story, Pearl is preparing for Yom Kippur and wearing nylons. This suggests that Pearl was perhaps 12 or maybe 13 by this time, as she also notes that she was fasting (12 years of age for a full fast for a girl). As she continues recalling that long ago Yom Kippur, she lets slip that at that time, "she hadn't even reached puberty". Suddenly Pearl is no longer a pre-teen dressing up: she is a precocious 10-maybe 11 year old aspiring to adulthood through
clothing and rituals (fasting).
Once I realized the book was a series of incidents rather than a chronological tale, I was able to focus on the tales and not be caught up in the conflated time lines.
Goodman describes herself as “a stickler for detail, gathering and ferreting to make sense.” Her narrative is in the detail, and her detail is truly exquisite. She recalls, for example, how her mother put on her nylons “[feeding and releasing] enough material through her fingertips to keep the stockings at a specific tension,” brought to mind the apprehension and dread that accompanied putting on a pair of stockings without snagging them or creating a run. A second scene in which she considers a candy dish and its contents brought to mind the times I had also sat alone in a living room while my parents were ensconced with their tea and cake at the dining-room table of the host and hostess for that evening.
Goodman juxtaposes her memories of significant incidents in her life with the singular labour camp experiences of her parents, mostly her mother. For example, in trying to explain to herself her mother’s fears whenever she, Pearl, wanted to leave the house to visit friends, Goodman provides a brief description of the day her mother last saw her father and brother not realizing this was the last time she would see them. Each time the reader encounters a fragment of her parents’ story it clarifies for Pearl and the reader why her parents behaviour towards her was, to her way of thinking, so erratic.
The often strong and explosive emotional responses of her parents, especially her mother, to seemingly simple requests or curiosity on Pearl’s part provides Goodman the opportunity to engage in “what if” imaginings. Before describing an outburst, Goodman first describes the troubling incident that provoked the outburst and then draws on the conversations of the family sitcoms of the 1960s, especially the show Leave it to Beaver to illustrate alternate responses. In her young mind, all conversation is a rational discussion of the problem and the only possible outcome is one that leaves everyone
happy. The reality is that all conversations of any significance to Pearl are connected to the fact that her parents survived annihilation and there is little her brother or she can do to surpass this.

Memoirs like Pearl Goodman’s remind us that the Holocaust did not end in 1945, but in fact remain an integral part of the lives of those who grew up in its shadow. Goodman’s Toronto is not my Toronto. Her memoir however, catches the city (and the country) at that time just before multiculturalism became mainstream and just before established Canadian Jews were ready to really listen to what had actually been happening during the war years to the “greenehs” in their midst.