
Reviewed by Beverley Chalmers, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

It is not often that one gets to review a Holocaust narrative that is written to honour the life of one’s mother. Even more remarkable is that this text commemorates the life not only of Rabbi Joseph Carlebach’s wife, Lotte Carlebach-Preuss, but is written to commemorate the lives of all mothers who lived – and died - under Nazi rule. While Lotte Carlebach-Preuss was but one unique and very special life, there were countless others who shared many of her experiences. This text is a fitting tribute to them all.

I have dedicated my life to understanding women’s lives, and particularly their lives as mothers, who gave birth and cared for children under extremely difficult social, religious, economic and ideological circumstances, including during the Nazi era. One of my texts is dedicated to exposing the hardships experienced by German women, both Jewish and non-Jewish, under Nazi Rule (Birth, Sex and Abuse: Women’s Voices under Nazi Rule). Miriam Gillis-Carlebach’s book extends this subject far beyond the reproductive life of Lotte Carlebach-Preuss who at 18 years of age married a distinguished and widely respected Rabbi eighteen years her senior, and subsequently gave birth to nine children. It is a unique and remarkable account of one woman’s devotion to her marriage and her family and the resulting honour in which the third of her nine children, Miriam, now in her nineties, still recalls her mother’s warmth, love and care. If one of my own children will remember me with such love and respect in decades to come I will have succeeded royally in life.

This book recalls the life of the Carlebach family in Germany. It is also the story of a Rabbi living through the Nazi era but not being able to escape the Nazi net, primarily due to his own willingness to give up his chance for escape to save the life of another. It also recounts the world of one of nine children, brought up in a strict and observant Orthodox Jewish home, surrounded by love and caring, as well as dedication to helping others. The endless and
boundless love of her mother made each child feel special and led one, Miriam, who did manage to escape Germany in time, to devote much of her life to continuing her father and mother’s memory. ‘Honour thy father and thy mother’ has real meaning in this text.

In essence, the book provides a thoroughly researched and extensively substantiated account of her mother and father’s lives. Books, statements, testimonies, letters and photographs provide the sources underlying this review in addition to Miriam’s own recollections. This is not simply an emotional or cathartic review: it is an historical analysis that is grounded in a lifetime of academic excellence. The book reveals the intimate and personal childhood life of religious Jewish families gradually enduring the increasing hardships imposed by the powerful Hitler regime in the 1930s. It evokes strong childhood images of Jewish life: for example, of challot (sweet white plaited loaves) with large ‘yeast holes,’ shared on Shabbat (the Sabbath); of broken biscuits that were cheaper to buy; of always having something to eat available despite increasing scarcities; of blue ‘onion patterned’ china; of the children, lining up in age order, waiting to dip their half bread roll into their father’s runny egg yolk at breakfast, to share this rare treat with him; of family meals under the Sukkah during the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkoth); celebrating the joyousness of Simchat Torah, (the Rejoicing of the Torah) for the last time before Nazi rule ended these festivities; singing Lecha Dodi (Come my Beloved) to welcome the Sabbath, following one of the 2000 melodies that have been composed for that song; crystallized candies clustering on strings; and wonderful Passover Seders and other festivals with, sometimes, 40 or more family, friends and others in need of a home, joining in the celebrations.

Miriam reflects on the traditional role played by her mother as a devoted wife and loving mother who showed skills in resolving conflicts, soothing cares, maintaining friendships, supporting community activities and relationships, visiting the sick, housing children of sick neighbours in her already overflowing home until their parent was well again, hosting wedding ceremonies and providing a trousseaux for women without families or in financial need; preparing alternate family meals when her caring husband gave away the family meal to others in greater need; and managing to care for each of her many children as if each were her only one. Lotte Carlebach was truly a remarkable woman. As a wife she steadfastly supported her distinguished husband and saw it as her role to undertake every needed action to ensure that his
knowledge, skills and leadership of the Jewish communities he served as Rabbi, were facilitated and supported, including the need to have as many of his children as possible as she felt that any child of someone as great and wonderful as her husband Rabbi Josef Carlebach, left unborn, was a loss to the world. She also loved the warmth, love and joy that she gained from caring for and cuddling little children. These actions were no burden, but acts of real love that her parents shared and that united them in their path through life.

The book also recalls the increasing alteration in attitude towards her and her family that crept in to neighbourly relations as Hitler’s ideology took root such as: Kristallnacht and the destruction of the store selling soft baby wools where she loved to go; her best friends and neighbours blocking the hole in the fence that had provided easy access for their many children to play together; having to move house because Jews were no longer welcome and any excuse was used to evict them; and the increasing number of friends and family that left Germany before the exit gates closed for Jews. The book, however, focuses less on the horrors of the Holocaust than on the joys and love of her family home and childhood, even though it is clearly mentioned that her parents and three youngest sisters all perished.

The first half of the book reflects Miriam’s own memories of her childhood. The second part includes the many, and sometimes heartbreaking, letters that have survived, written by her mother, family and friends over these years that bear testimony to the reflections of the author. In addition to providing real-time insight into thoughts, feelings and events of the time, these letters reveal the linguistic excellence of a time gone by when letter writing was an art as well as a means of communication. The book leaves one with a feeling of being privileged to have shared in this remarkable family’s life, almost as though one was present through it all. It leaves one asking questions...what happened to them all? How did each child who survived cope with the separations and manage to live life after such desperate losses? Some insights are provided through the many letters that are included, but less knowledge is gained about some of the children, who wrote infrequent letters, or whose letters have not survived or not been included in the text. Neither does the book fill the reader in on Miriam Gillis-Carlebach’s own later life story although one would very much like to know how she and her siblings managed to continue after
the Holocaust. This book leaves one asking for more. That, in itself, reflects its genius. This is a Holocaust memoir of notable calibre.