Hiding Places: A Father and His Sons Retrace Their Family’s Escape from the Holocaust


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Daniel Rose, a travel writer and novelist whose family was shattered by divorce, decided to take his sons, ages seven and twelve, on a European journey searching for their Jewish roots. Interspersed with his retelling of their quest are chapters recalling Rose’s boyhood in Connecticut. These two layers are connected by hiding places: as a boy Rose often fled bullies or his own inner struggles, hiding from demons far less threatening than the Nazis who threatened his relatives.

Daniel Rose tells surprisingly little about his mother’s family or her childhood in Antwerp, which she left in 1939. Through his travels we learn that the family originally came from Poland, and dealt in diamonds, which they also cut, polished, and traded. Visiting that city and Brussels, he locates an elderly distant cousin, Jacov Pesach Morganstern, who reveals (and conceals) selected details of his escape from death as the Nazis pursued Jews through Belgium and France. He lends Rose and his sons a cryptic journal filled with notes, odd mementos, and clues to the mystery of his survival. The trio visit J. P.’s brother Schloime, who worked in the Belgian Resistance, and his estranged son Olivier, who sends them to the only synagogue in Paris which remained open during World War II. They manage to locate a wine cellar and a hotel attic where J. P. hid, and the convent of Franciscan nuns whose German abbess hid his twin daughters, later murdered at Rivesaltes, an internment camp in the south of France. They experience the suspicion and duplicity that confronted Jews attempting to hide while they seek to find and to confirm the scribblings in J. P.’s enigmatic journal. French Basque residents assist them, identifying with Jews as the outsiders in France.

These chapters make fascinating reading as the detective quest leads to encounters with characters as archetypal and strange as those described by Peter Mayle or other travel writers. Suspense hangs in the air, but fortunately Rose and his sons ultimately succeed in finding their elderly cousin’s hiding places, and resolving the mystery – at least in the author’s imagination – of his daughters’ deaths. Ironically, when they return to Antwerp triumphant and ready to give J. P. back his journal, the old man has suffered a stroke and is no longer able to speak to them, although he apparently hears their account of what they found.

Less interesting are the inter-layered chapters devoted to Rose’s boyhood. He grows up as the child of privilege: his mother runs an art gallery while his father, a psychoanalyst, is on the faculty at Yale. He attributes numerous childhood incidents, including being sexually groped by a bigger boy, as acts of Christian against Jew. Yet many of these incidents seem motivated by ordinary childhood resentments and rivalries: physically stronger children picking on those who are weaker, working class toughs bullying the privileged son of the upper class.

The book seems intended for descendants of Holocaust survivors wrestling with family memories and the heritage of diaspora and persecution. Holocaust scholars will compare the
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book less favourably to Helen Epstein’s factual memoir Where She Came from: A Daughter’s Search for her Mother’s Memory. They may be frustrated by its lack of coherent Holocaust narrative, and impatient with Rose’s approach: historical research would be more effective than travel as a way of studying the Nazi persecution of Belgian and French Jews. Rose appears ignorant of the existence of French detention and transit camps such as Gurs and Drancy and fails to provide background about the capitulation of France and the complicity of the Vichy regime. Editors overlooked the misspelling of Majdanek, and the German phrase Wir werden leben (We will survive.) Less trivial are Rose’s implicit assumptions that all Holocaust camp survivors were tattooed, and his broad stereotyping of both Nazi and Jewish actions during this period. Of course Rose’s true purpose was not a historical account, but establishing the deeper psychological bond with his sons, and linking them unforgettably to their Jewish roots, as he undoubtedly succeeds in doing.

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