



Book Review

When Time Stopped: A Memoir of My Father's War and What Remains

By Ariana Neumann

Review by Kalman Goldstein

Superficially, Ariana Neumann enjoyed a privileged Venezuelan childhood. Her mother was young and beautiful; her father, rich and powerful. But there were disquieting things about papa Hans. He spoke Spanish with a thick Czech accent; he was a divorcee and a non-churchgoer in a Roman Catholic country. Mama was 20 years younger; strangers thought he was Ariana's grandfather. Hans was embarrassingly punctual and tinkered obsessively with 297 pocket watches he kept in a windowless room. Above all, he refused to speak of his past. One day, Ariana came upon a box of his papers; inside of which was a photo ID with his picture but with the name Jan Sebesta. When she asked about it, Hans was silent, and not until his death did the box reappear. But on his deathbed, Hans did compose a memoir about how "Sebesta" had enabled his survival during World War II. The box of mementos, in Czech and German, would lead Ariana not only on a search to understand her father, but to reconstruct his family's fate: over two dozen had died in Sobibor and Auschwitz. Ariana discovered distant cousins and descendants of Hans' friends, all of whom contributed documents or anecdotes. Her mission led her to Switzerland, Australia, France, Britain, Israel, the US, and Indonesia, as well as the Czech Republic. The result is an absorbing and empathetic account of how the war had shaped her father.

Some of Hans and his brother Lotar's survival stories will be familiar: dealings with the black market, bribing gendarmes, forging false IDs as Ivan Rubes and Jan Sebesta, hiding from the Gestapo behind a false wall for weeks on end (this inspired the book's title), and being aided by righteous Gentiles. However, the Neumann brothers' story is unusual in the extent to which Gentiles enabled their survival. Hans' father, opposed to organized religion, had refused to circumcise his sons. A friendly priest would baptize them for good measure. The baptism made no impression on the Nazis, who hunted Jews as a race, not religion, but not being circumcised would prove useful. Hans' best friend, Zdenek, was a non-Jew, as were his sweetheart Milada and Lotar's fiancée, Zdenka. Both Zdenek and Zdenka arranged forged papers, bribed the SS, and worked the black market to smuggle goods into Terezin, thus enabling their parents to survive for three years before being sent to Auschwitz. More than once, Zdenka sewed on a yellow star in order to smuggle herself in and out of Terezin to aid her in-laws. Zdenek found

work for Hans to delay his being deported, and when the Prague Gestapo were coming too close, suggested Hans survive in plain sight as a chemical engineer in a Berlin firm with strategic ties to German defense! Here, Ariana quotes her father verbatim, revealing his faux-courtship of Nazi co-workers, his occasional sabotage, and important espionage relating to rocketry experiments.

All this is fascinating, but for Ariana most revealing was discovering how the war explained the hard-nosed father she had known. To his family, the youngster had been “the unfortunate boy,” whimsical, accident-prone, romantic, naive, and always tardy. Step by step, Ariana explores how Hans came to conclude, “...the war was a time when anyone who indulged in the luxury of feeling emotion was a dead man.” Dodging the Gestapo by becoming Jan Sebesta required creating a persona and always being self-consciously reticent. By Liberation, Hans Neumann had internalized this persona: sober, punctual, guarded, diligent, and domineering. The unfortunate boy had become Ariana’s father: an alpha male, burying the past by controlling time.