

‘Leaving Tomorrow’

By Neville Teller

The Book *Leaving Tomorrow* is a novel. In other words, it is a tale conceived by the author about people and events brought to life from her imagination. However, the places and historical events against which her novel takes place, described vividly by the author, are entirely authentic.

Françoise Ouzan is a renowned historian and expert in the field of Jewish experience during and after the Second World War. She has studied and written widely about the Holocaust, antisemitism, and American Jewry, all of which feature in the experiences of her heroine, Rebecca Samuelson.

Leaving Tomorrow takes place entirely in the 1940s. We first meet Rebecca in 1945. Recently liberated from the Bergen-Belsen camp, burned to the ground, she is on a train that is returning her back to Poland. The policy of the allied authorities immediately after the war was to repatriate as many ex-prisoners as possible back to their country of origin. What follows for Rebecca mirrors the experience of thousands of Jews who managed to survive in Nazi-dominated Europe and live on after the war.

In Poland, on top of all she has endured, Rebecca is traumatized by the animosity she finds in her home town, especially from the Polish family that has taken over her family house. She has the door slammed in her face as someone calls out, “Have the Jews risen from their graves?”

What follows is worse. Rebecca is in the house adjacent to a neighbor, the Singers, when a crowd gathers with people shouting “Those Jews have locked up a Christian child in their basement.” Stones are flung at the house as the crowd screams the ancient blood libel (“they drank the blood of Christian children”). Rebecca barely manages to escape and learns later of the Kielce pogrom—one of more than 20 in Poland in 1945—when 42 Jews were slaughtered.

Rebecca returns to the displaced persons (DP) camp set up in the British zone not far from the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. It is here that the essential theme of the novel is played out – a tug of war between Rebecca’s dream of a new life in America and a career as a journalist, as against the burning desire of her Zionist lover, Jonathan, to make



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Françoise S. Ouzan

to Palestine and help create a new world there.

Ouzan paints a vivid picture of what life was like for the remnants of Europe’s Jewry as they struggled to discard the dehumanizing experience of concentration camp life. Rebecca was hampered at every turn by unsympathetic officials who seemed determined to frustrate her determination to reach America. Pregnant with Jonathan’s child, she decides not to join him as he sets off to attempt to immigrate illegally into Palestine.

Rebecca’s subsequently experiences, all set against the authentic backdrop of life in 1940s America and Israel, are a tale of love and loss, of life and death, of hope and frustration. In the end, it is a story of self-discovery.

Before Rebecca realizes her dream of working as a journalist in America, she recounts early experiences of less than a fulsome welcome from some well-established American Jews, to say nothing of suddenly coming across a notice affixed to a gate that reads: “No Dogs. No Jews.” Frank, the man who had offered to accept her child as his own and whom she marries, whispered, “Even here...”

Ouzan sets Rebecca’s later story against the backdrop of the May, 1948 United Nations vote in favor of a Jewish state, and Ben-Gurion’s Declaration of Independence at the birth of the State of Israel, and its first, desperate battle for survival.

Ouzan’s novel was originally written in French and published in 2007. Now English-speaking readers are able to enjoy Ouzan’s unforgettable story. Ouzan adapted the English version herself, and it is powerful and convincing.

Ouzan’s story emerges in sparse, haunting, graphic sentences, and the book is no more than 150 pages long; but its evocative and poignant images will linger in the mind.

Throughout the story of Rebecca, Ouzan paints an indelible picture replete with the additional indignities heaped by their liberators on so many of the victims of World War II. Even so, for so many who struggled through, a brighter, more hopeful life did emerge.

It does for Rebecca. The denouement of Ouzan’s novel finds Rebecca *Leaving Tomorrow* (as the title suggests) for a future she never originally envisaged. ■



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The cover of the book