

Author offers moving, human catalogue of a vanished world

MY mother has always brushed off my attempts to question her about what she lived through in Warsaw during the war years.

I long ago learned to stop asking, but I still can't shake the one startling answer with which she once dismissed me years ago: "I have never laughed or danced as much as I did in Hitler's Poland."

Only after I read Anna Baum's *Procession: Stories from A Polish Past* did my mother's astonishing statement begin to make sense. A slow but steady parade of real-life characters marches across the page, beginning in the paradise of privileged prewar life, moving inexorably forward despite the early warnings of the imminent destruction of their world.

Along the way, they forge chasms, shed possessions and

SMALL PRESSES
EVE DROBOT

**PROCESSION: STORIES
FROM A POLISH PAST**

BY ANNA BAUM

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family, face the abyss, then regroup with the tatters of their dignity to take stock and give thanks for the mixed blessing of their survival. And the music that accompanies them on their long march is the sound of children singing and of laughter, underscored by grace notes of human compassion.

There were approximately 2.1 million Jews in Poland before 1939. Today, fewer than 10,000 of the country's population will admit to being Jewish.

Not all of the difference perished in the Fascist killing

machine: hundreds of thousands survived by living huddled in dirt-floored cellars for years (taking nightly "turns at the entrance to inhale fresh air"), by fleeing to the relative safety of Soviet labour camps, or by "passing" as Christians with false identity papers and memorized catechisms. "I will give them an everlasting name," said the prophet Isaiah. And Baum does. They are Itta, a simple young girl with the singing voice of an angel who was "the first from our town to die in Auschwitz."

The Marcuses, proud and snobbish Russian immigrants, too paralyzed by their personal tragedies to flee while there was time. Cousin Lydia, who left two astonished Polish bounty hunters sitting in her apartment while she waltzed out the back way, never to return, in a bathrobe and hair

curlers, carrying a pail of garbage. And Cousin Balbina, who kept her beloved doctor husband alive through all the war years, only to have him die in her arms at the sight of the liberating Soviet army.

There was Irena, who pretended to be a Gentile, and who waited until the war was over to be consumed by Catholic mysticism. And Malka, who was 13 years old when helping hands pushed her through the floorboards of a moving deportation train.

She found refuge in the cellar of a farm house in the woods, and was horrified when she first looked into a mirror three years later to see staring back at her an "apparition (that) was certainly a hundred years old, with almost no hair, big ears, hollow eyes...and barely covered teeth (that) were dirty brown."

And there was Mendl, who

fell off the same train as Malka, but was not so lucky. He saw the wounded Malka lying in the forest, but was found by local peasants, handed over to the Gestapo and sent back to an extermination camp. Yet while others dropped around him from hard labour, he survived, knowing that the girl he had seen in the woods was his "destiny." Against all odds, he found his way back to her and in the ruins of postwar Poland, nursed her consumption with miraculously procured cream, milk, butter and eggs.

A few years ago, a traveling exhibit of magnificent artifacts of prewar European Jewry came through Canada. For those who missed it – or want more – Baum's book is the perfect addendum. Hers is the human catalogue of that vanished world. It was as

though she had to survive to become the curator of a treasure trove of personal experience.

For while there is suffering and tragedy in *Procession*, there is culture, tradition, art, music, history, professional and social achievement, learning – and, yes – laughter, dancing and love.

Baum has not written this book about herself. Her priceless collection is of other people's stories. Her great talent is her ability to listen, to remember and then to relate with elegiac style what she has heard. In *Procession*, she could give names to only a handful of people, but she speaks for hundreds of thousands who were muted by the horrors they witnessed.