

An Intrepid Woman Takes on the Nazis and Wins:

Irene Oore. *The Listener: In the Shadow of the Holocaust*. University of Regina Press, 2019. 142 pp.

Although there now exists an abundant literature dealing with the Holocaust, a work that can place this most horrific chapter in human history in a sharp new perspective is always welcome. Professor Irene Oore's book is especially welcome because it is an outstanding account of a young Jewish woman's ability to survive the Nazi reign of terror, thereby proclaiming the triumph of the human spirit over the forces of degradation and death. The story that Irene Oore relates is not her own, however. She herself was not born until several years after the Second World War was over. It is centered on her late mother, an intrepid human being who refused to buckle under almost inhuman pressure. Irène Oore is indeed the listener of this story, transcribing as accurately as possible the events that Stefania Knopf strove to bring back to life, and thus living in the shadow of the very Holocaust Stefania had experienced in all its sheer cruelty.

As a young child, Irene, the daughter, was very reluctant to listen to the gruesome accounts of life in Nazi-occupied Poland as related by her mother, Stefania. In fact, in her youth Irène tried to shut out her mother's words. What they conveyed terrified her. She would have much preferred that Stefania read her fairy tales. At least the latter would have transported her into a magical realm. But her mother was relentless in insisting that Irene listen to all the war stories, each one as horrifying if not more so than the ones that preceded it. All these eye-witness accounts constituted a legacy that the mother was determined to bequeath to her daughter. It mattered, then, little to Stefania that Irene was endeavouring to blot out the Holocaust from her existence. Stefania would force-feed Irene until her daughter would eventually realize how essential it was for her not only to accept wholeheartedly the relating of her mother's experiences but to transcribe them for posterity.

Thus, while Irene evokes chronologically the events that left an indelible imprint on Stefania during the war years, she also charts her evolving attitude towards listening to her mother's stories of the horrors the latter and her family had endured. The daughter eventually became a most attentive listener, and with this change in attitude came the fear of perhaps not being worthy enough of transmitting her mother's narrative. As the author emphasizes again and

again, there is an unbridgeable gap between knowing what happened and experiencing it. A very striking example among many can be found in the description Stefania gives of the noise made by Nazi soldiers as they tramped with their heavy boots up the staircases of apartment buildings looking for Jews to deport and/or kill right on the spot. This tramping of boots provoked a visceral terror in her mother's heart. All Irène could feel was deep sympathy for her mother's plight because there was no way she could move backwards to a time and place that no longer existed and be gripped by the same dread that overcame Stefania. As Irene observes, "This is where I stumble. She will always hear the German boots. I will just hear the story of the sound of those boots" (62).

Accompanying Irene's awareness that she will never be able to experience the agony her mother lived through is the sadness stemming from doubts about her ability to live up to her mother's expectations. At various points in her mother's narrative, Irene deplores her limited understanding of what Stephania had endured. Thus, she acknowledges sadly: "It crossed my mind that Piotr, my dead brother, could have perhaps listened and understood better. I feel exasperated; her expectations of me, and her disappointment, seem immense. And, as is often the case, she appears to be devastatingly right" (68).

The legacy Stefania bequeaths to her daughter is precious for several reasons. With uncompromising and, indeed, ruthless honesty, Irene's mother takes her on a journey into the darkest recesses of the human condition. I do not know whether Stefania was familiar with a very pessimistic statement the author Robert Louis Stevenson once made about human nature, but her narrative certainly illustrates it: "Man has secret thoughts that would make Hell blush." Perhaps the most dreadful truth she imparts to her daughter based on having suffered through the Holocaust, is mankind's need to hate. Although Stefania never formulates this explicitly, it appears obvious to the reader that the hate-ridden Nazi ideology is founded on the toxic fallacy of racial superiority. Not being Aryans, Jews were considered an inferior species. Being forced to wear the yellow star of David sewn on their clothing simply underscored this inferiority. Therefore, it was perfectly logical, normal and even inevitable for the Nazis to subject them to systematic degradation. They could torture their fellow-man/woman without feeling in the least monstrous. The book is filled with descriptions of acts of unspeakable cruelty committed against Polish Jews simply because they chose to worship essentially the same God in a different way.

One example will suffice. Stefania observed that when the German soldiers went up to check the apartments to make sure that everyone had gone down into the street to be rounded up and shipped to concentration camps, if they found a mother hiding with her baby, they would first throw the baby out the window, then kill the mother.

Not all Nazis or Nazi sympathizers acted as brutally. Nevertheless, in their way they contributed to upholding and even strengthening the regime. Sometimes denunciators blackmailed Stefania and her sister, Flora. They demanded money to remain silent about the women's illegal status. Neither Stefania nor her sister were under any illusions, however, that paying them off would put an end to their anxieties. They knew that these blackmailers might come back again and again, demanding more and more money; and if ever their money ran out, the women would be denounced to the Nazi police.

Nor could their fellow-Jews be entirely trusted. In the Ghetto the Germans had set up a special office employing only Jews. These were traitors to their coreligionists, veritable "scum", as Stefania labelled them (53). As a result of their treachery, rich and influential Jews who might have attempted to escape the Ghetto were rounded up and killed. Two of those Nazi flunkys survived the Holocaust and eventually made their way to Israel where they enjoyed the peaceful, worry-free life they didn't deserve.

In addition to the journey through the Nazi hell that the book evokes for us, it is memorable for another reason. Irene Oore draws arresting portraits of two exceptionally strong women, her own grandmother and mother. The author regrets to this day that she never had the good fortune of getting to know Sonia, her maternal grandmother. Despite the nerve-crunching stress of living in a ghetto under ruthless Nazi surveillance, despite a very weak heart that might give out at any time, despite hunger gnawing at her constantly, Sonia persisted in creating a climate of joy around her. Stefania confirmed this. An uncompromising judge of character, Irene's mother paid Sonia the supreme tribute by telling her daughter, "Your grandmother had the gift of joy" (47). Even Stefania's "awkward efforts" in preparing noodles touched off gales of laughter in her mother.

As for Stefania, she projected the image of an unshakeably calm, fearless presence. Even though she, too, was vulnerable to fear—one would have had to be inhuman not to experience this emotion—she continued living as though she enjoyed immortality. Even though hunger was

always gnawing away inside of her, even though the Nazi terror was stalking her and her fellow-Jews like “hunted-down animals” (95), Stefania never wavered in her determination to help family members and other people in distress. What also helped keep her alive and free from the Germans’ clutches was the incredible swiftness with which she could assess a situation, then act accordingly. During a shooting at night in a Warsaw street, she knew she had to take shelter in the nearest building because the curfew hour had passed. She persuaded the clerk at a Bata shoe store to let her spend the night there. When he got drunk and proposed that they make love, she kept him at bay by holding out to him the promise of a date once he sobered up.

Yet coexisting with such admirable qualities was a very troubling trait in her character. Stefania felt a loathing towards her fellow-Jews which at times could almost be interpreted as anti-Semitism. She took pride in not looking like a Jew. With her fair complexion, blue eyes and blond hair she could easily pass for Polish and Christian. She also derived a deep satisfaction from not walking, talking or acting like a Jew. She boasted about her infallible ability to identify any of her coreligionists immediately. It was as though the cruel and unusual punishment meted out to her people over the centuries and culminating in the Holocaust convinced her that they had been forsaken by destiny and their God. She seemed to believe that they were living under a curse, and that by despising them she would, in her way, avoid the same fate.

Irene Oore is sometimes aghast when she recalls how her mother would express her aversion towards fellow-Jews. But she paints a very balanced portrait of Stefania and shows us that her mother had many redeeming features. Stefania could, at other times, show flashes of compassion and tenderness, especially towards children desperately needing her help to survive. To save a Jewish child, she accompanied him by train from Starachowice to Warsaw, a dangerous undertaking, comforted him when he cried, and instilled in him the courage to remain calm until the trip was over. Despite her merciless lucidity concerning human nature, Stefania did, then, believe that the human condition was not totally rotten. This is borne out again in the author’s account of several Christians who risked their lives and those of their families to shelter her mother and aunt during the Nazi reign of terror. The transport Führer Anton Graf saved Stefania’s life by placing her as a maid—a non-Jewish one, of course—with an Austro-German family in Katowice and placing her sister Flora with another family in Bytom.

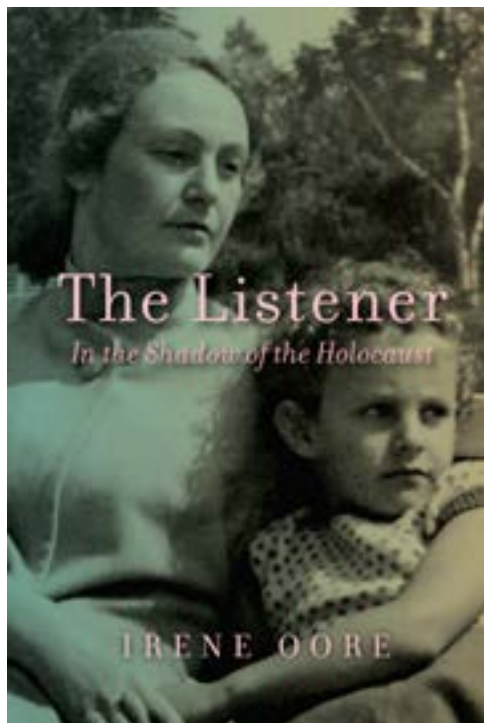
By transcribing this momentous story, Irene Oore bears witness in her way to the immense courage and nobility of which human beings are capable, despite all the flaws inherent in their natures. She accomplishes this in a style that is terse, incisive, yet can soar lyrically without sentimentality when the occasion requires it. And most importantly for me, her account of her mother's limitless bravery and endurance illustrates eloquently a sublime thought expressed by the great Franco-Jewish writer, Liliane Atlan. In fact, Atlan's words could serve an epigraph for Irene Oore's book: "There are times when the burden of one's pain seems so overwhelming that one sincerely believes life simply cannot go on any longer. Yet it does go on. And that perhaps is the greatest miracle of all." Although often heartbreaking, the book is strangely uplifting.

For its depictions, then, of an irrepressible will to live, of evil lurking within our human condition, for its portrait of a remarkable woman expressed in an equally remarkable style of writing, *The Listener* is a must-read.

Léonard Rosmarin
Professor Emeritus of French Literature, Brock University

Leonard Rosmarin is Professor Emeritus of French Literature, and former Chair of the Modern Language Department, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario. He is a specialist in 17th century French literature, as well as a novelist.

For those who may be interested in obtaining a copy, please see the information below.



THE LISTENER: In the Shadow of the Holocaust

by Irene Oore

**A reflection on how trauma is passed
from generation to generation**

In *The Listener*, a daughter receives a troubling gift: her mother's stories of surviving World War II in Poland. During the Holocaust, Irene Oore's mother escaped the death camps by concealing her Jewish identity. Instead, those years found her constantly on the run and on the verge of starvation, living a harrowing and peripatetic existence as she struggled to keep herself and her family alive.

Throughout her memoir, Oore reveals a certain ambivalence towards the gift bestowed upon her - the stories of fear, love, and constant hunger traumatized her as a child. Now, she shares these same stories with her own children, to keep the history alive.

Irene Oore is the co-author of *Marie-Claire Blais: An Annotated Bibliography*. Born in Łódź, Poland, she immigrated to Israel as a child and is now a professor of French at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

September 14, 2019

9780889776531 (print)
\$24.95 CDN / 19.95 USD paperback
4.25" x 6.5" • 104 pages

Categories: memoir / Holocaust

Series: The Regina Collection
(vol. 13)

MEDIA REQUESTS

Please contact Melissa Shirley at
melissa.shirley@uregina.ca
or 647-389-9510

"...demonstrates the persistence of
memory and the pervasiveness of
evil"
-*Kirkus Reviews*

Named as a tribute to the history of boldness and innovation of Saskatchewan's capital city, **The Regina Collection** builds upon our motto of "a voice for many peoples."