



At the Mercy of Strangers: Growing Up on the Edge of the Holocaust

Suzanne Loeb

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For Jews trapped in Western Europe during World War II, survival depended largely on where they lived. Belgians, Danes, and Bulgarians did a lot to save their Jews. At the heart of *At the Mercy of Strangers* is the account of how Suzanne Bamberger, her mother, and her sister managed to be among those lucky enough to survive the long Nazi occupation of Brussels.

At the Mercy of Strangers has two voices. Both are Suzanne's. We hear her as the harassed, frightened, gutsy, and bored adolescent whose diary was her only true confidant. And we hear her as the mature woman, recalling the war years from the safety of post-war America.

This coming-of-age book provides us with unusual glimpses of the cataclysm that engulfed Nazi-dominated Europe from 1939 to 1945. We watch the storm clouds gathering over Germany. We witness the invasion of Belgium, the futile attempt of a quarter of the population to escape the Germans, and the increasing stranglehold of the German occupation. We gasp at the pace at which incidents escalate from the merely insulting and hurtful to the terrifying and incomprehensible.

We are relieved that the Bambergers opt to go into hiding rather than be "resettled" by the Germans. There is poignancy in the juxtaposition of the tedium and frustration of Suzanne's daily life with the ever-present danger of discovery. There is the fear of being deported to an unknowable fate, and the grief for friends who have vanished.

Suzanne's diary records her blossoming, secret love for Emile, a member of the Belgian Resistance, and of her constant need to be careful and "good." We share her fantasies as she lies alone and hungry in an attic adjoining a storeroom for onions. We hope with her that she will be able to join the Resistance and work for justice alongside her beloved Emile.

Cataclysms like the Nazis' war against the Jews, the African slave trade, or the slaughter of Native Americans by Europeans forever haunt our consciences. Our collective guilt subsides, however, before the realization that invariably a few "ordinary" people respond to such crises with courage, compassion, and disregard for their own safety.

At the Mercy of Strangers is uplifting, even though it never minimizes the horrors of the Holocaust, or of World War II. Suzanne's mature self summarizes her feelings:

"I never regretted having grown up on the edge of the Holocaust. The experience not only left me as a stronger, more compassionate human being, but, strange as it may sound, it provided me with a deep faith in humanity. Though I have much evidence to the contrary, I believe that often, when you have your back against the wall, somebody out there comes to the rescue."

Cover design by Gloria Kamen

Praise for *At the Mercy of Strangers*—

“I was absorbed by the story, by the narrative energy that informs Suzanne Loebel’s writing, and not least by the moral lessons she has to offer . . .” —Robert Cole, MD, Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

“Suzanne Loebel’s generous approach to life and toward people, as well as her fresh and open outlook on that period . . . will strike a resonant chord in the vast reading public . . .” —Luk Durras, Consul General of Belgium

“Suzanne Loebel shares with us a compelling story of life on the edge of discovery; a sustained search for meaning in a time when annihilation of both life and meaning was so readily disclosed. The recollection of how it was to seek and find shelter through concealment reveals the rescuing side of the Holocaust period.” —Rabbi Jason Z. Edelstein, St. Vincent College

“Every survivor’s story is an amazing document. . . . I was struck by how able Suzanne Loebel was in recording her feelings while in hiding . . . and gratified by the great help she received from righteous Gentiles.” —Jack Polak, Anne Frank Center former president

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