Incomplete pages

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The Pages in Between
By Erin Einhorn
Touchstone
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Irene Frydrych Einhorn did not want to return to Poland, the country of her birth. She expressed little interest in the Skowronskis, the family who had taken care of her during World War II. When Irene came to the United States, her father and stepmother, the only Holocaust survivors in the neighborhood, told their stories over and over again, until she "got very sick of the situation and just wanted to leave the room." Irene avoided movies like The Diary of Anne Frank, not because they were too upsetting or violent, but because they were "overkill! That's it. Overkill!"

Her daughter, Erin, a reporter for The Philadelphia Daily News, felt differently. Growing up in suburban Detroit, she learned how Beresh Frydrych had jumped from a train taking him and his wife to the death camps; bandaged the gunshot wound in his leg with the armband that labeled him a Jew; deposited Irene with Honorata Skowronski; got rearrested and sent to Auschwitz and Buchenwald; survived, by working for Siemens, the German manufacturing company; picked up his daughter when the war ended, and relocated to Sweden and the US. Erin decided to spend a year in Poland, not to find out more about transport trains or death marches, but, she hoped, to find something sweeter, "a better life in the future, one more informed by the past," with the Frydrychs and the Skowronskis reunited.

The Frydrych family narrative, she discovered, was "pocked with holes." In The Pages in Between, she fills them in - and reveals what happened to Honorata, whose children and grandchildren still occupied the house Beresh Frydrych had promised to give to the Skowronskis in exchange for hiding Irene.

The Pages in Between is not as successful as Daniel Mendelsohn's extraordinary memoir, The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million, in recapturing both the vastness and the personal intimacy of the Holocaust. The cast of characters in her book - Einhorn's father, brother, boyfriend and even her mother - are one-dimensional. We don't know or care all that much about them.

Einhorn sometimes steps on her narrative by telling, in cliché-ridden inner monologues, what she should show. After her mother's death, she writes, "my apartment was still vacuously empty... I sat feeling sorry for myself, feeling alone, feeling lost." Four pages later, she is "walking around in a daze again, sitting by the side of the river, getting stoned, not sure where to go, whom to talk to, what to do."
When her father postpones his visit to Poland, "I, alone, was left to loll by the side of the river, doing nothing, feeling down, overwhelmed by how much I missed him and how much more I was missing her."

Nonetheless, the book offers a penetrating examination of the behavior of ordinary people in extraordinary times. Einhorn is especially tough-minded in probing Polish anti-Semitism. It's easy to like Jews, she notes, when there aren't many around. Too many 21st-century Poles admire a "wonderfully, pleasantly, non-threatening" culture that never existed, with Jews "wandering the earth in search of a home" where they could light candles and sing songs on a Sabbath night until they find one in Poland.

The vast majority of the 3.5 million Polish Jews in the 1930s were not "aging, pious men in dark hats," quietly fulfilling the commandments of their God. They had assimilated, and threw sharp elbows as they competed for jobs, applied to universities, joined labor unions, socialist movements and Zionist parties, and agitated against laws discriminating against them. "In real life," Einhorn writes, friends, neighbors, and countrymen can be genial and generous and covetous and cowardly. They can "know each other's flaws and despise them." How far, she asks, should a person, and, by implication, a society, go to right cross-generational wrongs?

Irene always insisted that Honorata had done it for the money. When Beresh got to America, she pressed him to give her a Chevrolet. Honorata's children had an even greater sense of entitlement. They were happy to see Erin because they wanted the title to "their" house. They needed it, Erin learned, because the government held them responsible for real-estate taxes but wouldn't order tenants to pay rent as long as ownership of the property was in limbo.

What did the Frydryches owe the Skowronskis? Whatever Honorata's motives, Erin could not forget that she risked her life to keep her commitment to Beresh. Her "bravery had led to two more lives - my brother's and mine." Erin didn't know what her grandfather had promised in the 1940s, but felt that Honorata's reward should extend to her children and grandchildren. Even if the Skowronskis saw her as "a cash machine." Even if Helen, Wieslaw Skowronski's wife, thought that Jews ate "some kind of blood-filled cake" during Shabbat services.

Erin's commitment seems at once noble and naive. In the end, she is sustained less by her mission of family reunification than by her friendship with Krys, a genuinely philo-Semitic Polish nationalist, and Marta, Wieslaw's daughter. "Maybe reconciliation was meant to skip a generation, to be left to those of us for whom the past was not so personal," Erin tells herself.

In the meantime, she had done justice to memory, by uncovering a photograph of Sura Leah Rozenblum, Irene's mother, who probably perished at Auschwitz. And by bringing her cousins to the very ground in the city of Bedzin on which their ancestors once walked.

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