Ordinary people make heart-wrenching decisions about rescuing Jews in the darkest times.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER  SEPTEMBER 12, 2019 10:59
Shifting her car into low gear, Truus Wijsmuller, a heroine of Meg Clayton’s seventh novel, drives across a field to a path in the woods.

After a while she sees a flicker of movement.” When she stops the car, what might have been a deer becomes a girl, perhaps 15, zigzagging through the trees. “I’m Tante Truus,” she calls gently. “I’m here to help you get into the Netherlands, like your mama told you to do.” As the girl eyes her, a boy sticks out from the brush, then another. “Can you take us all?” the girl asks. “Yes, of course.”

The girl whistles loudly, and more children emerge from hiding, one of them a baby in her sister’s arms. “Good heavens,” Mrs. Wijsmuller says to herself, she will have a full car. She “had no idea how the ladies would find beds tonight for 11 children, but she would leave that for God to provide.”

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Loosely based on the Kindertransport effort led by Geertruida Wijsmuller to rescue thousands of children, most of them Jewish, from Austria in 1938, The Last Train to London is an engrossing, heart-wrenching, and inspiring account of ordinary people making life-and-death choice in the darkest of times.

The novel focuses on two teenagers trapped in Nazi-occupied Vienna. Stephan Neuman, the son of a wealthy chocolate manufacturer, is an aspiring writer (whose idol is Stefan Zweig). His best friend, Zofie-Helene Perger, a precocious mathematician, is a Christian girl whose mother edits a newspaper sharply critical of the Nazis. Clayton keeps us wondering – and worrying – whether Tante Truus will make a deal with Adolf Eichmann in time to save Stephan, Walter Neuman (his little brother), Zofie, Johanna (her baby sister), and hundreds of other children.
The Last Train to London is, at times, stagey. Clayton relies on some stock tropes: Stephan and Walter communicate to and through Peter Rabbit, a stuffed animal; Adolf Eichmann’s best friend is Tier, “the most beautiful slope-backed German shepherd in all of Berlin.” On occasion, twists and turns of the plot seem contrived.

That said, the novel is filled with emotionally laden moments that seem authentic. Two examples:

In Prater Park, Stephan and Zofie sit on a wooden bench with a shiny metal plaque declaring it “Reserved for Aryans.” They are confronted by young Stormtroopers who force Stephan to goose-step along the promenade, followed by a jeering crowd, while singing, “I am a Jew, do you know my nose?” Up and back he walks, for about three miles, and when he does not raise his legs high enough to please his tormentors, they knock him down. By then, Clayton writes, “There was no anger left,” only humiliation, “as, in the distance the Ferris wheel circled its long climb around and around against the sky.”

Truus stands in Adolf Eichmann’s office, waiting to ask him to authorize visas to allow Austrian children to emigrate to Britain. Puzzled as to why a “respectable Dutch woman” wants to help “the chaff of humanity,” the obersturmführer asks her to remove her shoes because “you can tell a Jewess by the shape of her feet”; to
walk; and to lift her skirt over her knees. “Unbelievable,” Eichmann exclaims. “A woman so pure and yet so crazy.” He will permit 600 Jewish children to leave the country, not one more or less, on Saturday. “And after this first six hundred?” Truus asks, eliciting from Eichmann “the large mean laugh of a man used to being denied what he wanted, yet wanting the world to think otherwise.” Back in her hotel room, Truus takes a bath, removes her clothes, folds them neatly, and puts them in the trash bin.

Clayton also invites readers to ponder problems in moral philosophy. She returns repeatedly to claims that “all of life is binary. Right and wrong. Good and evil. Fight or surrender. War without the choice of neutrality this go-round.” Equally often she undercuts this conclusion. Truus, who has suffered three miscarriages, believes, “You could help one, or you could help many, but there wasn’t time to do both, even if you could stomach the risk.” Stephan’s uncle Michael, a Christian, forces Herman Neuman to “sell” the chocolate business to him, divorces his Jewish wife, and cozies up to the Nazis – only to act with compassion, courage and love later on.

Most important, The Last Train to London gestures toward the translation into practical terms of an ancient conundrum, “the liar’s paradox” by Zofie’s teacher, Kurt Gödel. Disproving the dichotomy of statements into true and false, Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, published in 1931, demonstrates that all consistent axiomatic formulations include undecidable propositions. Clayton calls attention to the role of contingency in human existence in a brief chapter titled “Chaos Theory,” in which the narrator declares that chaos is “the one thing even mathematics couldn’t predict.”

Perhaps that’s why, in the end, Truus Wijsmuller, this wonderful woman, is “sure of nothing.” Feeling she ought to “say something profound” to the children she has delivered to England, Truus wonders what there is to say and “settles for telling them what good children they were.”

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