

HillRag

The Literary Hill

By
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December 13, 2021

Beyond the Pale

In the late 18th century, Tsarist Russia created the Pale of Settlement to confine Jews into a swathe of provinces on the border of Russia and Poland. It was here, in 1900, in the Polish town of Grajewo, that Hirsch Bieler was born. The stories he later told of his eventful life echoed those of many of his lost generation. Now, more than a century later, his daughter and her husband have “pick[ed] up the baton,” compiling his “painstakingly detailed tales” into a book that serves both as a memorial to him and a testament to the times he lived through.

“A Border Town in Poland: A 20th Century Memoir,” as told to Nora Jean and Michael H. Levin, is the story of Bieler’s life, from his upbringing in Grajewo to his immigration to America just prior to World War II. And what stories he has to tell! Some of the most vivid involve Zelde, the ugly but clever crone who ran the town’s smuggling operation. Working as her [teenage] courier [and eventual ‘adjutant’] helped him survive the poverty of his childhood—but also resulted in some hair-raisingly narrow escapes.

After WWI, he became “a man without a country.” He fled to [Weimar] Germany, where a kindly family saved him from deportation by adopting him and helping set him up in the fur business. When that [ended with the end of Hyper-Inflation], he survived by selling [lubricating] oil to farmers [, then became Leipzig manager of a Soviet-German consortium formed to sell Russian oil products in the burgeoning German market]. Unfortunately, the rise of Nazism eventually took its toll. People he’d known for years turned on him and his [potential] citizenship was revoked. [In 1936 he emigrated to British Palestine.] Thankfully, a contact in the oil business

helped to get him a US visa and Bieler—now with a wife and young daughter—was able to come to America [by 1938].

Throughout his life, Bieler supported his extended [Polish] family, but when Europe fell to the Nazis, he was unable to get them out. The final section of the book reprints their heartbreaking letters pleading for help, and his desperate but ultimately doomed attempts to provide it. None of his relatives in former Poland survived the war.

The story of Bieler’s long life is one of displacement, resilience, loss, and hope. As the Levins write, “He shared his tales to make sure they would not be lost. He believed that through his telling, those lives would live on.” Thanks to them, they now do.



Based in part on oral history, Nora Jean and Michael H. Levin’s “A Border Town in Poland” tells the story of Hirsch Bieler’s life.

The Levins are also the authors of “Two Pianos: Playing for Life,” a ‘concert documentary’ about female Jewish musicians who performed during the Third Reich. www.twopianosplayingforlife.org

[This version of the review contains certain fact corrections approved by the reviewer]