



Mama Namibia

Mari Serebrov

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Surviving on her own in the desert, 12-year-old Jahohora searches for her family while hiding from the German soldiers. It's 1904, and Germany has claimed all of South West Africa. Since the Herero would rather fight than surrender their ancestral homes, Gen. von Trotha has declared that they all should be forced into the Omaheke to die. Wasting away in the desert, Jahohora is about to give up her desperate struggle for life when she finds hope in a simple act of kindness from a Jewish doctor serving in the German army.

Mama Namibia Details

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From Reader Review Mama Namibia for online ebook

Sarah says

I received a copy of this book via LibraryThing's Early Reviewer program.

First I have to admit how horribly unaware I was of the historic events taking place in Namibia during the pre-WWII period and the terrible crimes committed by the German army & colonists towards the Herero. As a German, I feel deeply horrified and sad by yet more atrocities that have been done to innocents. What makes me even more sad is how these acts are kept under the table. I can admit that before reading this book I was absolutely ignorant towards these events; never before did I hear this topic being discussed anywhere, not in school, nor any media outlet.

The book is well researched and while it starts out somewhat slow, it conveys all the horrors of the times while at the same time it made me deeply admire Herero culture and beliefs. I immediately started liking Jahohora and her family. The every day life of the Herero is vividly described and I felt that I learned a lot about the culture in a lively way instead of a dry history lesson.

This book is truly important and so worth reading - especially if you did not have any prior knowledge of this topic! I know I would like to gift my family some German copies of this for christmas. It has to be read.

Laura says

Although I initially struggled to get into this book for my personal lack of knowledge on Namibian historical facts, I found it profoundly engaging and an absolute masterpiece. It describes Herero and Jewish traditions in a beautiful religious parallel where the ancestors are central to the essence of these two peoples during Germany's occupation of South West Africa. What the Germans did in this land is truly horrific, the repeated history of brutal colonisers - regardless of their nationality - claiming the land for a superior race. I did not know about the Herero Genocide and I must thank the author for her outstanding research enabling me and other readers hopefully to unearth this from a not so distant path. I particularly commend the author for the different use of linguistic styles to show the evolution of the central Herero character Jahorora, from baby girl in her village amidst the Herero tribes, to woman at the service of a Christian family. Kov's parallel life in Germany, his religious background and his experience in the German army as a doctor are seen through the eyes at first of a young idealist and then through the eyes of a grown man, a brilliantly described evolution. I could not hold back the tears at the end.

Maya B says

fictional story based on facts. I gained a lot of knowledge. The first part of this book was a little slow. It didn't pick up until the middle. To read about what the Germans did to the Herero had me in shock. I enjoyed the topic, just not the way the story was presented. This is a story of genocide and colonialism

Kim says

"General von Trotha nearly succeeded in his efforts to exterminate the Herero. Over a span of just a few years, more than 60,000 Herero, or 85 percent of the tribe, died. While thousands were killed by German troops, countless more met death in the desert or German concentration camps. The remnants were forced to work for German settlers or condemned to a life of exile in surrounding countries. As for Samuel Maharero, he was allowed to return to the land of his fathers only in death."

This book is a must read! Says a work of fiction but in the epilogue it states many characters were based on real people. This story will make you cringe, cry and wish these things did not really happen. To read about the strength and will of the Herero people is inspiring and sobering!

Kelly Kittel says

This is a book I am passionate about, given that my son is currently living in Namibia where he is serving in the Peace Corps, but also because this is a chapter of history that has largely been ignored and of which many are ignorant. If that is true for you, as it was for me, I encourage you to read this well-written, engaging, and informative book about a shameful chapter from the past.

Between the years of 1904-8, German imperial soldiers massacred thousands of Herero and Nama in what is referred to as the "first genocide of the 20th century." Certainly you'd be hard pressed to find people who have never heard of the genocide the Germans inflicted on the Jews during WW2, so why is it that the world knows little to nothing about the Germans annihilating 80% of the Herero people and 50% of the population of the Nama people only a few decades earlier? I can only surmise that it's because these were African people, aka savages. Shame on us all. When everyone is quick to agree that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it, perhaps it would have changed the world, had we only thought to pay attention.

Namibia was so-named in 1968 but only achieved independence from South Africa in 1990. But what was then called German South-West Africa was a German colony from 1884 to 1915. In what is a common story for most colonized countries, including America, people like the Native Americans or the Herero get along for awhile, or not, and eventually there is a spark that ignites an inferno. In this case, the spark was when the Herero became incensed by crimes committed by German settlers, igniting a revolt in 1904 that resulted in them killing more than a hundred Germans over several days. The Nama people joined them in their revolt the following year, fanning the flames. Enter the inferno: German troops targeting and killing around 100,000 people from the Herero and Nama communities in 1904-5. As the fire spread, the German imperial rulers responded ruthlessly. Generals issued extermination orders and rounded up tens of thousands of Herero and Nama people and placed them in prison camps. Around 100,000 people are estimated to have died in the camps and many of their skulls were sent to Germany for "scientific" research.

The German government has since used the term "genocide" to describe the killings and many of the skulls were returned to Namibia in 2011. *Mama Namibia* is the tale of two alternating stories, both told in first person to great effect by Serebrov. One protagonist is a 12-year-old Herero girl, Jahohora, who will be forced to flee into the desert with her family, and the other is a young German Jew, Kov, who wants to be accepted by his homeland so he becomes a doctor, joins the army and is shipped off to German South-West Africa to serve his country in their war against the Herero people.

Like other African tribes, the Herero have historically practiced the alteration of their teeth, typically by

knocking out the bottom four and filing their top teeth into points said to resemble a swallow. And, so, our story begins with our protagonist confirming this alteration of her father, whom she calls by the universal term for that very word, “Tate smiles. I see his pointed front teeth. His tate and mama filed his top teeth and knocked out his bottom teeth when he was a little boy. I don’t want Tate and Mama to do that to my teeth. It would hurt.”

We learn the most ancient of Herero stories here, the creation story that most cultures have some version of, “I sit on the ground as Mama begins the story. “On first day, Njambi Karunga called the first ancestors from the trunk of the omumborombonga tree. One by one, they stepped from the sacred tree. Mukuru and Kamangarunga, the first Herero tate and mama, stepped from the tree. Then the first Berg-Damara tate and mama. The first Nama tate and mama. The first tate and mama of the Ovambo. The first tate and mama of every tribe on earth.”

Considering that my other house is a yurt, I particularly appreciated this explanation for the traditional round house, the rondavel, “At last, the baby house is done. It’s round, like our house. “A round house keeps snakes away because it makes no shadows where snakes can hide,” Tjikuu says. “Herero who build square houses like white people are foolish. Round houses bring good luck. They’re like nature.”

We are treated to wise and poetic quotations, such as this about truth: “It is up to us to choose what is right. No one can make us eat a lie.”

Or this about sunrise and sunset: “Yesterday touches tomorrow in early morning and when the sun goes to sleep.”

Or this about death: “Lots of people come to tell Tjikuu stories about Tjikuume. They tell about good things and bad things Tjikuume did. I ask Mama why. “It gives balance to his life,” she says. “And it helps clean our sadness.”

Switching to Kov, we find him being raised as a Jew, the only child of a “famous Nüremburg spielwarenmachers” as they call artisans like his father, who is asked by an important man who enters their shop one day to “craft the little tin figures of the German officials who were the first to govern South West Africa.” This man, a Count, will have great influence over Kov, who says of this first encounter, “He handed Papa some photographs of Reichskommissar Göring surrounded by African Herero for Papa to use as a guide.”

There are two sides to every story, and the author does a good job of presenting both sides of this colonial conflict. Kov becomes a frequent guest at the Count’s castle where, one day, they are visited by Goring who recounts what he has experienced of the growing conflict in SW Africa, “So early that October, we all headed to Okahandja to negotiate a treaty with the chief, but when we got there, he refused to see us. He was too busy preparing for a meeting with the Witboois.” “The Whiteboys?” Christof asks, struggling with the pronunciation. Göring sips from the stein that is always close by. “Hendrik Witbooi was the chief of the Nama and the arch enemy of the Herero chief. The two were always fighting over land and cattle.”

As a Kittel, I’m always happy to read any reference to our name, which is a ceremonial robe we encounter here as Kov prepares to visit his mother’s grave, “I stand in front of an old mirror, adjusting the white kittel over my dark suit.”

I also particularly enjoyed the many times he walks us through Jewish rituals and recites traditional prayers, such as this, “As I reach the graveyard, I pick up a pebble and pocket it. Then I do the ritual cleansing,

washing my hands at the pump provided for that purpose. Entering the gate, I recite the customary blessing: “Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe, Who fashioned you in justice, nourished and sustained you in justice. Who knows your total count in justice, and Who in the future will revive and keep you alive in justice. Blessed are You, the Lord, Who resurrects the dead.”

And as a mother to a son named Isaiah, I always enjoy reading passages from the Biblical book of the same name, “I find new comfort in the ancient words. I ponder their meaning before continuing with the proper passages from Isaiah and the Psalms: “Your dead will live again; my corpses will arise. Awake and sing, dwellers of dust! For the dew of light is Your dew, and the earth will give forth the dead. And He is merciful, atones for sin and does not destroy, frequently turns away His anger and does not arouse all His wrath.” Being careful not to step on any graves, I walk over to the granite, tablet-shaped stone marking Mama’s resting place. The tombstone is covered with the pebbles Papa has left on his many visits.

I begin the prayers for Mama, but the words seem to apply to me as much as to her: “And the Lord will always guide you, and satisfy your soul in scorched places, and resurrect your bones. And you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of waters that never fail. From you will rebuild the ancient ruins; the generations-old foundations you will re-establish. They will call you ‘the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the ways of civilization.’ Rest in peace until the coming of the Consoler Who will proclaim peace.”

... and [I] finish the memorial prayer: “May her repose be in paradise. May the Lord of Mercy shelter her under the cover of His wings forever and bind in the bond of life her soul. The Lord is her heritage. May she rest in peace on her resting place.” I take the pebble out of my pocket and put it alongside all those left by Papa. At the gate of the cemetery, I ritually cleanse myself of death.”

Back in Namibia, we learn of Johohora’s own ancient rituals and practices of daily life, such as this termite gathering technique when they find a termite hill: “Mama takes the hollow branch I found and fills it with the dry grass. She puts it in front of the main opening. Then she strikes the flint stones against each other, causing a spark that lights the grass. As it begins to burn, Karemarama and I quickly get more grass to build the fire. We hold the big calabash close to the fire so we can catch the winged termites that try to escape the heat. They swarm out all at once – right into our calabash. Mama covers the calabash with a skin so none of the termites can escape. By time we get back to the camp, the aunties have made a fire and are ready to roast the insects. Mama carefully releases the termites into a hot pan. As the termites roast, an auntie gently tosses them into the air so their thin wings fall off and float away. The now-wingless termites drop back into the pan. While termites taste good, their wings don’t. One time I ate a termite that still had its wings. They stuck to the top of my mouth. I had to pull hard to get them out.”

Kov completes his training and is ready to serve his homeland, already learning that he will not be treated like those “few doctors with family connections or years of distinguished service” who “will work out of the main German hospital in Windhük. Rather, “As part of Major von Glasenapp’s first and fourth seebatallions, I’ll be one of eight surgeons with the Marine Infantry Company. We’ve been assigned to mobile field hospitals, which are basically glorified ox carts. Even a few weeks in South West Africa will not be easy under these conditions.”

He is given his uniform: “My insignia, that of the surgeon, is a serpent wrapped around a pole – the healing stave of Moses. What irony, I think, as I affix it above the top stripe of the sleeve. The military, with its deep anti-Semitism, embracing a symbol that’s so Judaic.”

Before leaving, Kov marries, and after he ships off he’s delivered of a son, for whom he prays, “Our God, and the God of our fathers, preserve this child for his father and mother, and his name in Israel shall be called

David ben Yaakov.... Give thanks to God for He is good, for His kindness is eternal. May this small infant David grow and become great. As you have come into the Covenant of Abraham, so may you come into Torah, into marriage and into good deeds.” David is now part of the Covenant that binds our family through the generations to Abraham.”

Once in SW Africa, Kov’s journey begins. Because my own son was served springbok for dinner almost every night for the two months he lived with a host family during his training, I marked this passage when one of the officers “shoots his gun. The animals spring into the air, running and jumping swiftly across the veld. The officer laughs. “That’s why they’re called springbok,” he says.”

I enjoyed being introduced to Namibia along with our Kov, learning about trees like the camelthorn tree, which is actually named for giraffes as they eat the leaves using their highly specialized tongues which enable them to avoid the thorns. The tree also has seed pods and the seeds can be ground to make a substitute for coffee, and who doesn’t love that?

As he experiences the vast number of stars in the pure darkness of an African night, Kov waxes, “I’m reminded of God’s promise to Abraham: “I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it forever.” I imagine Abraham looking up at a desert sky and pondering that promise. I sleep, somehow comforted by the knowledge that my family is part of that covenant made thousands of years ago in a desert very much like this one.” So now you begin to see the parallels emerging between the oppressed paths of our protagonists.

As does our protagonist, so my son, too, lived in Okahandja for his two months of training, so I felt partial to this: “Headquartered at the fort in Okahandja, Trotha spends weeks drilling the troops and plotting strategy with his top officers. The general seems to revel in the irony of quartering in the home of Samuel Maharero and in the town that was the setting for the start of the uprising. It also was here that Göring first signed the treaty with Samuel’s father, promising to protect the Herero from their enemies. It was here that Mr. Störmer opened a beer garden next to the Wecke & Voigts store, knowing he was encroaching on the sacred burial grounds of the Herero chiefs. And it was here that, according to some accounts, Lieutenant Zürn pushed Samuel and his men to take up arms against the settlers.” All of which give clues as to the insidious forces at play in the name of conquerors.

We read about a history which has been playing out in this country and on this continent for centuries: “And when scouting parties encounter peaceful Herero, they bring them in neck chains to the prison camp that lies within view of Moordkoppie, a rock outcropping where a band of Herero were slaughtered half a century ago while defending their lands from other invaders.”

As our doctor and his troops join the others in spreading out and annihilating any native they come across, our two protagonist’s paths will intersect but I’ll leave the plot to your reading of it. Suffice to say, the desert will prove an opponent worthy of them both. Kov laments, “We move as if in a daze, going through the motions of life without really living. When I look around at what we’ve become, I once again wonder who is the more civilized. The German? Or the Herero? Yes, we Germans build houses and empires. But we rape and murder women and children. We kill the aged and the infirm. We trample their bones and leave their flesh for the beasts. All because we see them as an inferior race. One that stands in the way of our progress. Is this who I so desperately wanted to be? Is this why I left my family?”

Again with the kittel: “Drawing me to the fire, Alexander notices my surgical coat and smiles. “Not quite a kittel,” he says, “but it works.”

As the war rages on, Kov learns of this: “Concentration camps?” The term is new to me. “They’re prison camps modeled after the ones the English used in the Boer Wars. We’re basically ‘concentrating’ hundreds, if not thousands, of Herero into small prison camps here in Windhük and along the coast,” he tells me as he checks my pulse.”

In her post-script, Serebrov informs: General von Trotha nearly succeeded in his efforts to exterminate the Herero. Over a span of just a few years, more than 60,000 Herero, or 85 percent of the tribe, died. While thousands were killed by German troops, countless more met death in the desert or German concentration camps. The remnants were forced to work for German settlers or condemned to a life of exile in surrounding countries. As for Samuel Maharero, he was allowed to return to the land of his fathers only in death. Although these events unfolded more than a century ago, the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the Herero who survived still live with the consequences of the genocide. Once a proud, powerful force in the land that was to become Namibia, today the Herero make up about 10 percent of the Namibian population. Much of the land their herds once grazed is still farmed by the descendants of the German colonizers. And for more than a hundred years, many of the bones of their ancestors, collected from the death camps or dug up from their graves, have been the “property” of German universities and museums. Twenty skulls gathered for Dr. Eugen Fischer’s research were finally returned to the Herero in October 2011. One was that of a four-year-old boy. Germany partially apologized in 2004, accepting “political and moral responsibility for the past and colonial guilt.” While it has given generously to Namibia in foreign aid, Germany refuses to pay reparations for a genocide it has yet to officially admit. In 2007, members of the von Trotha family met with Herero leaders to offer their own apology. “We all bear the same family name and that is reason enough to deal with historical facts associated with General Lothar,” Wolf-Thilo von Trotha, chairman of the von Trotha Family Association, said at that meeting. “We, the members of the von Trotha family, are ashamed of the terrible events that took place a hundred years ago. We deeply regret what happened to your people and also to the Nama and Damara – the cruel and unjustified death of thousands of men, women, and children.”

Along with books about the under-reported Armenian genocide, this terrible chapter should be added to history education textbooks worldwide. Run, don’t walk.

K3

Jackie says

A story of the war in South West Africa and Herero genocide in the early 20th century is told from the points of view of a Herero girl and a German military doctor. Not an easy book to read but an important part of Namibian history.

Kevin Pedersen says

This is the story of two people, a Herero girl and a German-born Jewish doctor, during what turned out to be a German genocide around the turn of the 20th century. The stories interweave, but only lightly, which makes sense narratively - slamming them together too much would feel contrived. It leaves me with questions I do not know the answer to.

Is it okay that this really goes out of the way to paint the events here as a sort of prequel to the Holocaust? The book makes quick references to things like gas and tattoos that really only serve to set up what we all know is coming, without really impacting the plot. It seems in a lot of ways the events here *were* a precursor, and that focus definitely is a way of getting the modern eye to take note of it. But does that diminish the events themselves? Or maybe is it good, that it sets them in a sort of historical context?

Is the constant parade of horrors that kicks off about halfway through the book necessary to show to the extent it's shown here? Maybe yes. It's all based in truth, and there's a merit to the story just showing it, unflinchingly. But after a certain point, does it make us little more than gawkers?

Is Kov redeemable? He feels guilty as he watches what the Germans do, but in the end he does very little to really change things until after the fact. That's certainly realistic, but how are we supposed to feel about him as a character? We're in his head so we never feel like he's sadistic, or enjoying his time in the military. But he also just watches as his compatriots play baseball with a living baby. Is his guilt enough to get him back from that? Is it fair to judge him at all?

I don't know. It's a heavy read. And apparently Jahohora's side of the story, from the Herero point of view, is pretty much biographical. There's not a lot out there about this event, so the book feels important.

Beverly says

I will have more thoughts on this book shortly.

But two thoughts came to mind immediately after reading - this was a fascinating compelling read on the genocide of the Herero people and the book blurb does not do this book justice as I would have easily overlooked this book if it was not a book club pick,

Molly says

Fine read for an introduction to the German atrocities (read: genocide) in Namibia in the early twentieth century, but I found the writing lacked depth and the character development was quite weak.

Rebecca says

This important story has not been told often enough, the history of the Herero genocide is still but invisible in the usual narratives of history, and yet it is one of the most telling stories in colonial history. understanding this book reveals that white supremacy and racism is not about white people fearing black people, but instead about white people being utterly convinced of their own superiority. white people truly believe they are superior and have therefore a RIGHT to torture and maim others whenever they want. this story needs to become much more part of world history than it currently is and Serebrov had done a good job of narrating the full horror. I won't be surprised if this take gives me nightmares.... it is overwhelming.

Sharon says

A German teacher friend once told me that her country's colonial exploitation of South Western Africa before WWI marked the first screw-up in a long line of screw-ups. I knew the facts of the debacle but I didn't really understand until I read the historical fiction novel *Mama Namibia*. A German Jewish military story interplays with a young Herero girl who has lost her tribe. The author provides an interesting story to a well-researched body of information. I'm afraid readers who have no prior knowledge of the Namibian history may get lost in the veld.

Andrew says

"*Mama Namibia*" is based on the events which took place during Germany's control of the country we now call Namibia at the start of the 20th Century. We view the genocide through the eyes of two people, Jahohora, a young Herero girl fighting for survival and Kov, a Jewish doctor serving in the German army.

Following Jahohora as her people fight to preserve their freedom, culture and land, there is the deep feeling of the loss and destitution her people face. It is ever present that here is an enemy whose sole purpose is to exterminate you - men, women, children, the old and the young.

The atrocities that Kov sees committed by the German army on a daily basis is another part of this tale. Seeing unspeakable acts of savagery leads him to not only question the humanity of the Germans but his own, as he seems powerless to do anything about them.

Mari Serebrov has captured the events and the atmosphere of that time very well in this work of fiction. Indeed much of what we find in this book is based on historical fact. Concentration (death) camps, internment, forced relocation, slave labour, mass rape, trading in body parts of the murdered people as well as the medical experiments carried out on men, women and children were all the hallmarks of the German regime in South West Africa. This effectively set the model for what was later practiced in Europe under Nazi Germany. And out of this episode we see the ideas on 'race science' and 'racial superiority' in play to justify the acts of barbarism and which were to so influence the second and third Reich.

I found this a compelling story despite the horrific events it portrayed. I had heard of the Herero war fought against the German colonists but was never fully aware of the details. Reading this book did encourage me to further research that episode in history. Recommended reading!

Paul McAniff says

Damn....

The things they don't teach you in school. This book is evidence that a well used library card (or Kindle account) is worth a thousand diplomas. The factual research in this is remarkable. The implications of this story and the influence that the real world events had on future events cannot be understated. Read the author's notes at the end. I looked up a lot of things while reading this. The points I didn't discover that were covered in her epilogue were remarkable. One in particular.

Calzean says

The events in Namibia (German South West Africa) in the early 1900s are told in all of its horror. I am ashamed I knew nought about this genocide of the Herero people.

The narration is shared jointly between Jahohora, a teenage girl who survives 2 years in the desert avoiding the Germans and Kov a Jewish doctor in the German invading army who has joined to prove his loyalty to his country. I liked the way the two characters only come across each other twice and then only for fleeting moments.

It's a brutal book but it's a tale that needed to be told.

Cori Greer-Banks says

You ever meet a book that will just change you from the inside out? Stick to the bonds of your soul long after you read the last word on the very last page? This is one of those books. Jahohora's story is one for the ages.
