



An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin

Gad Beck, Frank Heibert, Allison Brown (Translation)

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That a Jew living in Nazi Berlin survived the Holocaust at all is surprising. That he was a homosexual and a teenage leader in the resistance and yet survived is amazing. But that he endured the ongoing horror with an open heart, with love and without vitriol, and has written about it so beautifully is truly miraculous. This is Gad Beck's story.

An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin Details

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From Reader Review An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin for online ebook

George Ilsley says

There's something about this memoir which is completely captivating. First of all, the author only died a few months ago, which is a kind of miracle: a gay, Jewish, Berliner who worked in the resistance, survived the war living in Berlin. All in all this perspective on life in Berlin during the war offers a glimpse of horror confronted with a kind of perverse optimism. For many, the optimism achieved nothing. For others, they lived to tell the tale.

Trevor says

Any review of a book about the lives of jewish people living in Germany during WWII will not do justice to the suffering and persecution that they were subject to.

From my perspective this was an interesting read, though not as emotional as I had expected it to be.

Considering that this is an autobiography of a gay jewish man living in Berlin during WWII I thought it would come across as a lot more harrowing than it did - this isn't to dismiss anything that happened to him as it is all pretty stressful, frightening and horrific. There were so many characters in his story that at times the story was difficult to follow, which took away from the narrative. Perhaps something is lost in the translation.

The book certainly gives a detailed insight into how people managed their lives and existence under unbelievable restrictions and pressure, and still managed to maintain a level of dignity and normality.

Boredlaura says

Amazing story. A book that I just couldn't put down, all the more amazing because it's true.

Although the story of a gay Jew living in Berlin under the Nazi should be horrific, Beck has such a way with words that it's simply engrossing.

Denis says

Gad Beck is a remarkable man who led an extraordinary life. His memoirs about life as a young, Jewish, gay man in Nazi Germany may not have the literary qualities that the most famous testimonies written by Jews who survived this harrowing era possess, but they are so vivid, filled with such an intense love of life, and so fascinating in what they reveal about daily life in Berlin under a brutal regime, that it hardly matters. An Underground Life is as gripping as it is moving, and remains, till the last page, a powerful read. Strangely enough, despite the horrific reality that it depicts and some heart wrenching episodes (many people that Gad knew ended up in the gas chamber, including the teenager who was his first love), it is an almost joyful book.

But then, Gad was a wonderfully joyful boy, and he seems to have kept this joy all through his old age. *An Underground Life* is a paean to the simple fact of being alive and of never giving up. As such, Gad's appetite for life is wonderfully communicative and comes across as a lesson. With a mixture of courage and insouciance, he also fully embraces his gay identity and doesn't shy away in those pages from remembering his sex life: that aspect is certainly surprising, as there aren't that many remembrances of openly gay men from this moment in time. Gad is surrounded by a family that is very accepting: that, too, is quite heartwarming. What propels the book forward - besides of course the numerous adventures that Gad faces as he fights Nazism his own way - is his personality: his joviality, his directness, his openness, his sensuality, his wit, his fantastic audacity (he was extremely active in helping his fellow Jews who were hiding illegally in Berlin) are all irresistible. As a document, his memoirs are equally amazing: Gad talks in details about the complex situations that families that were partly Jewish and partly Christian were facing, about how Jewish resistance organized itself in Berlin before and throughout the war, about how Zionist groups managed to thrive, about the many events that shaped life in Berlin then (the bombings, the infamous Rosenstraße manifestations, etc), about how many Berliners of various backgrounds helped hide and save Jews. The result is an astounding painting of Nazi Germany as seen through the eyes of a brave, jubilant, intrepid Jewish teen who happened to be gay and who wanted to live fully, no matter what. His sense of observation is a precious gift. *An Underground Life* is also an homage to many unsung heroes and victims that deserve to be remembered, and the lovely portrait of a family where Jews and non-Jews were fighting side by side against fascism.

Erin says

He was half Jewish, gay, and a teenaged Zionist resistance fighter, living in Nazi Berlin- by all accounts, Gad Beck should of never survived World War II. But he did, and his memior is one of the most moving portraits of World War II life I have ever read. The walls and lives of Berlin collapse around him, but Gad Beck writes about being surrounded by friends, family, and lovers that all manage to stand so tall. A must read.

Michael Kerr says

It's hard to imagine facing arrest and incarceration in a concentration camp for being gay - but this is the world Gad Beck describes. It's even harder to imagine the treatment the author received after the war ended. Not cheerful, but worth reading.

Dianna Am says

I felt a bit disappointed with this book. Gad Beck was an incredible human being who saved so many lives and really was a backbone of gay Jewish survival during the holocaust. His life was fascinating; accidentally becoming a revolutionary at a young age all while trying to find himself through many jobs, lovers, friends, and tragedies. His account of his life has a lot of value and shows the unique challenges faced by gay Jewish people during the war. Mamsi was a very endearing character as well, an incredible person. That being said....I feel this book doesn't do Beck's life justice. I know he wrote it so it's from his own experience but the book can be difficult to read at times. To put it bluntly, I got bored a lot and struggled to

get through much of the book. Beck does a lot of name listing which can get tedious and confusing. At points the book succumbed to being a wall of text.

Another strange thing is one particular point in the story where Beck mentions how an older man had sexual relations with him as a child. Beck mentions that he enjoyed it, which is not unheard of for victims of sexual assault, but he talks of it fondly and doesn't mention it at all as being abuse. This fact is not addressed at all and it's a bit disconcerting. Also, while I don't think he was lying, it's a little crazy to me just how many lovers Beck had during the war. It felt like every person he met was gay, it was a bit odd.

Still, I would recommend people read this book as it documents an important part of history from a rarely seen perspective.

Chris says

I had to read this book for a class on the Holocaust. We were given an extensive list to choose from and I picked this one because we have been told how if the Nazis had actually exterminated the Jews, gays would have been next. I was expecting something along the lines of other Holocaust books I have read, namely a depressing, heart-wrenching tale of the depravity of the human race. Instead, I was largely entertained. God forbid, I even laughed at parts. This CANT be a Holocaust memoir, can it? Apparently it is. Gad Beck was lucky enough to survive a Holocaust double whammy gay Jew combo and not even get sent to any of the camps. He had and made extensive connection and largely survived because he maintained an underground existence. But still, he managed to do significant work in the underground freeing others. I guess the fact that he was able to escape the camps in addition to his gay (meaning happy here) outlook on life allowed him to recall such a horrific period of history with such frivolity and good-naturedness. It is definitely not what I was expecting from a Holocaust memoir and the Epilogue in my edition mentions there is a second part to his memoirs but I have been unable to locate it. I would very much like to read the continuation of his story. If anyone reading this runs across information regarding the second book, PLEASE message me. Thanks.

James says

A great biographical account of a gay jew (of mixed parentage to be exact) in Berlin who survived the war. It's hard to imagine living as half jew / gay at the headquarters of the Nazi regime - kind of like living as a halfling on mount doom in lord of the rings and surviving!

A great read though from a historical point of view. Even though he was in the middle of such a terrible place/time he still managed to pull!

Ronald Beasley says

I didn't expect there to be so much sex in a story about a Jewish boy living in Nazi Germany. I suppose something had to be done to lighten the mood, but Gad Beck seems to have seduced or been seduced by every man and boy in Berlin. Lucky him. He also found himself being, not only gay and Jewish under the thumb of Hitler's regime, but also part of the very resistance that saved a number of lives and even entire families on the better days. Not among those saved was Manfred Lewin, Beck's love, who chose his family over Beck and paid for it with his life at Auschwitz.

Beck's story is undeniably tragic, especially considering Beck's own recent death in June 2012, which means

that he had to live for seventy years after losing almost everyone important to him. The point of the book is how he's managed this by treating every memory as a positive event, every gain and loss of friends and lovers as somehow worth it. It's improbable that anyone reading this book will ever have to endure similar trials, but if the time ever comes, Beck has left us with valuable lessons for dealing with the worst of human nature: spend as much time as possible with the people you love, fight evil however and whenever you can, and never miss a chance to have sex.

Samantha says

On one hand, a fascinating life and fascinating story of survival. It's very interesting to see how the status of "mischlings" worked in Nazi Germany. On the other hand, some of the sexual encounters described in the book verge very far into pedophilia and incest, without any characterizations of them as such, and that is quite frankly uncomfortable at the least.

Sean Kennedy says

An amazing read with a lot of heart, but you have to keep in mind that it is very short - about 170 pages. There were times when I wish more information could have been given, or more details in the setting as it is so fascinating and it is a unique addition to Holocaust literature.

MAP says

Several years ago I saw a documentary entitled "Paragraph 175," which looked at the persecution of gays and lesbians in Nazi Germany. A few days ago, I got a sudden inexplicable urge to watch the documentary again. It took me a few days to find a copy online that wasn't dubbed into Italian, but eventually I did.

After watching it, I started googling the different people interviewed. Most of them died nearly a decade ago, but when I looked up one person -- Gad Beck -- I noticed 2 things:

1. We shared the same birthday, June 30.
2. He died on the exact day I got the sudden urge to rewatch the documentary -- June 24, 2012.

In honor of these things, I decided to read his memoir. Fortunately, my university library had a copy.

3.5 stars.

David Swatling says

Extraordinary story, extraordinary life.
"God doesn't punish for a life of love."
- Gad Beck, (30 June 1923 - 24 June 2012)

Debbie says

Fantastically witty, insightful, heartbreaking and hopeful memoir of a young gay man, his family and friends doing all they can to survive war torn Berlin. Despite the obviously difficult subject, Beck's life account left me with mixed emotions but mostly joy - joy at how he not only survived but how he lived his life. A lesson for us all.
