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The Kommandant's Mistress

By Sherri Szeman

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An Arabian proverb counsels: "He who tells the truth should have one foot in the stirrup." This has become increasingly advisable for those who depict the Nazi death camps.

They find themselves attacked on one flank by the revisionists, who strive to lobotomize history by declaring the genocide never happened. By latest reliable count, they have convinced over one-fifth of adult Americans that the Holocaust might have been a Zionist hoax. The other flank, sometimes including even such sage demythologizers of the Official Jewish Position as Philip Roth (caution: it's always risky to assume which side of an issue this Möbius-strip writer is on), says, in effect, "Enough already! You're elevating suffering into an art form and now using this catastrophe to justify your own cruelty in the Middle East."

Sherri Szeman's riveting debut novel shields itself from this polemical crossfire by focusing on two views of one woman's ordeal of terror.

Almost immediately after Czech author Rachel Sarah Levi and her parents arrive in 1943 at the death camp ruled by Kommandant Maximilian von Walther, the elderly Jews are whisked to the gas chamber. The beautiful 23 year-old blonde, however, catches von Walther's eye. Despite his long-suffering wife and two children living upstairs, von Walther imprisons Rachel in his office. There she spends the duration of the war, sitting curled on his floor when not being forced to satisfy whatever carnal impulse interrupts his busy days of signing mass death orders. Rachel is less the kommandant's mistress than his dehumanized sex slave.

Szeman describes the horrors transpiring around Rachel: the ovens incinerating Jews 24 hours a day; the nearby villagers complaining of their drinking water, ignorant that it contains the ashes and pulverized bones of dead Jews; the ghoulish morality that encourages a five year-old German girl—who recoils at hearing how the witch cooked Hansel and Gretel—to play Nazi officer with her dolls: "Out of my way, Jew," she tells a doll, "Into the fire with you." Szeman captures, too, the religious fervor of Naziism, how Hitler is repeatedly called "Our Savior," the sound of young Nazi officers' "voices, chanting, like a prayer."

Szeman's interest, however, lies in the politics of personal experience. First, we hear von Walther's account. He believes himself a good man. Only good men could save Germany. He feels no guilt, no regret. As he ponders whether to kill with bullets or with gas, he believes himself a virtuous father making a better homeland for his children. There is even some logic to his belief that he is doing Rachel a favor. He is keeping her alive. He believes she likes and trusts him, so that when, after the war, he learns she has

published a book of poems about her pain he feels betrayed: "After all I did for her: fed her, clothed her, kept her safe, warm. And this is what she did to me."

But the torturer and the victim have different experiences. Lying beneath von Walther's body, her head turned so she can see naked fellow inmates trudge to the gas chambers while the rapist above her smells of crematorium smoke, Rachel, who narrates the second half, does not feel she is being done a favor.

The novel's structure, its varying viewpoints balancing a Nazi's inside-out conception of virtue and a young woman's extraordinary strength, its dizzyingly rapid transitions that both unsettle and heighten the story's hallucinatory terror, make this a stunningly effective achievement. In her first novel, Szeman has gone to the heart of an historical moment when we were such stuff as nightmares are made on.