

Reviewed by  
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The reviewer lived in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union for many years.

Much of the criticism of Israel's actions in Lebanon lately has tended to compare what is happening now to Palestinians with what happened a generation ago to the Jews—as though the slaughter of 6 million Jews is to some degree canceled out by the policies of Menachem Begin.

To read "Escape From Sobibor" is

## Book World

### ESCAPE FROM SOBIBOR.

By Richard Rashke.

(Houghton Mifflin, 389 pp. \$15.95)

to realize again why that reasoning is grotesque. The savagery of the Nazis and the public indifference of the West are stains on human morality that will not so easily be removed. Especially in the present climate of reexamination, this moving and angry book deserves to be read.

Sobibor was a Nazi death camp in Poland where 250,000 Jews, mainly from Poland and Holland, lost their lives in gas chambers. On Oct. 14, 1943, 300 Jews made a break for the forests around the camp. Behind them they left the bodies of a dozen Nazis and dead and dying inmates who couldn't make it past the guns in the guard towers or through the mine fields on the perimeter.

The experience of researching the book was almost as painful for author Richard Rashke as it was for those who had to reopen their pasts to him. Rashke, who lives in Wash-

# After a Nazi Death Camp

ington, is the author of "The Killing of Karen Silkwood." At the beginning of his investigation, Rashke was constantly questioned by survivors as to why he, a non-Jew, would want to write such a book, and what made him think he could possibly understand. Again and again he would explain that the Sobibor story was one of human dignity and resistance, and above all he was concerned about the recent rise of anti-Semitism in the world.

Rashke traveled very far to find survivors—Brazil, the United States, Israel and the Soviet Union. Some wanted anonymity, others not to talk at all. A few opened themselves to very painful recollection. Roughly the first half of the book weaves together their stories of Sobibor as a camp and the escape. The second part recounts their lives after they ran away, facing not just the danger of recapture by the Nazis, but the hostility of the Polish-civilian population.

But perhaps the most enduring bitterness stems from the indifference of the West. Rashke writes of the remarkable travels of Jan Karski, a 27-year-old Catholic who acted as a courier to the West for the Polish underground in 1942. He carried microfilm, and on his third arduous trip was captured by the Nazis and tortured. Following his escape from the Germans, he embarked on a fourth mission, this time to represent both the underground and the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto.

As added testimony of the Holocaust, he was smuggled into a death camp called Belzec. Jewish leaders felt that the eyewitness account of a Gentile would carry more weight with Western leaders.

After a three-week journey, Karski arrived in London, a hero to the Polish government in exile. The State Department and the British Foreign Office received summaries of his reports, which stated that more than a million Jews had already been exterminated.

Karski's was not the first testimony to reach the West. Many of the facts had appeared before in the press. In late 1942, two other authoritative reports reached London and Washington, containing dozens of eyewitness accounts and other material, including the fact that Hitler intended to annihilate all the Jews of Europe. Yet, as Rashke contends, "both the State Department and the Foreign Office were disturbed" about the effect of such evidence. He quotes a particularly callous comment that elsewhere has been attributed to the British Foreign Office: "There was a war on and they feared that the news of the final solution would distract the Allies into wasting a disproportionate amount of time dealing with wailing Jews." Both the United States and Great Britain declined to open their borders to any more refugees, maintaining that the Jews' real hope lay in an Allied victory.

Karski even carried his stories in

person to Justice Felix Frankfurter and President Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt praised the "indomitable attitude" of the underground and said that Poland would "live to reap the reward of her heroism and sacrifice." But there was no word for the Jews, and in fact, the United States had no plans to accommodate them. At the Bermuda Conference in the spring of 1943, the U.S. gave its negotiators secret orders *not* to offer to accept any more Jews; pledge funds for rescue operations; offer naval escorts for ships carrying refugees; or offer refugee space on empty ships. When the conference ended, the United States and England issued a statement saying they had reached several decisions regarding refugees of all nationalities, but could not reveal them because of wartime secrecy.

Given all this, it is not surprising that Rashke became emotionally entangled—and his feelings sometimes get between the reader and the dramatic narrative. The message, though, is clear. Rashke found people who not only told what had happened, but who feared it could happen again. As one said, "Intelligent people are saying today, 'It is not true. The Holocaust never happened!' . . . The roots are there. It all depends on how they grow . . . If there's a lot of flammable stuff around and you throw one match, there can be a big fire. That's the reason it's so important to keep the memory alive, so that people talk about it. Another ten or fifteen years, there won't be any witnesses."

Those who made it out of Sobibor speak and live as we do. And yet they feel as though they are still there. They are trapped in another prison by their memories. They would like to forget, but for the sake of all those they lost, they cannot. And that is the point of a very good book—for the sake of all those lost, no one must be allowed to forget.