Book Reviews for:

RESISTANCE OF THE HEART:
Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany
by
Nathan A. Stoltzfus

Times Literary Supplement
May 16, 1997

Snatched from the Jaws
by Richard Bessel

Nathan Stoltzfus opens his remarkable book with a quotation from Václev Havel:"We must try harder to understand than to explain. The way forward is not the mere construction of universal systematic solutions, to be applied to reality from the outside; it is also in seeking to get to the heart of reality through personal experience . . . . Human uniqueness, human action and the human spirit must be rehabilitated."

Few comments better capture the transformation of how that core fact of Nazi Germany, the murder of Europe's Jews, has been discussed in recent years. Not long ago, much of the scholarly writing about the "Third Reich", it's path to war and its campaigns of annihilation against its "racial enemies", tended to revolve around impersonal structures of power. Recently, however, personal agency and personal responsibility have again found their way to the centre of the debate. This change is not simply a function of the tremendous resonance of the remarkably provocative and remarkably flawed book by Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996). Rather, Goldhagen's book and its huge popular success are as much a consequence as a cause of the paradigm shift. In a sense, Goldhagen was riding the crest of a wave of victim history, and offered a most provocative attempt to shift the focus from the calculations of the perpetrators to the experiences of the victims of these horrible crimes -- from approaching "reality from the
outside" to "seeking to get to the heart of reality through personal experience."

In a sense, *Resistance of the Heart* parallels Goldhagen's work, in that it seeks to retrieve the human experience of the victims of Nazi persecution. At the same time, however, it is at odds with Goldhagen's thesis that the German people were saturated with an "eliminationist" anti-Semitism, which needed only to be unleashed by Hitler for it to lead to mass murder. Through a piece of remarkable detective work, Stoltzfus tells of the protest of "Aryan" women in Berlin who, when they learned, at the end of February 1943, that their Jewish husbands had been taken from work and herded into the Jewish community's welfare in the Rosenstrasse, engaged in an "unprecedented demonstration of public resistance to Nazi persecution of Jews". By this time, most of Europe's Jews had already been murdered. The Berlin police action was to be the "Final Roundup" of the last vestiges of the Reich capital's once thriving Jewish community -- of those Jews who, as a consequence of intermarriage, hitherto had enjoyed a relatively privileged existence. In the event, the Nazi leadership provoked "the singular incident of mass German protest against the deportation of German Jews", and they (specifically Joseph Goebbels) backed down in the face of public protest. As a result, between 1,700 and 2,000 Berlin Jews, married to non-Jewish German partners, survived the Third Reich. Indeed, the vast majority (98 per cent) of German Jews who did not emigrate and none the less survived were in mixed marriages.

For all its murderous intent and practice, the Nazi leadership was peculiarly sensitive to popular opinion. And the Rosenstrasse protest occurred at a critical time: shortly after the German surrender at Stalingrad and only nine days after Goebbels had given his famous "total war" speech, in which the Propaganda Minister tried to whip up the enthusiasm of the German people for new sacrifice. Goebbels, who took a close interest in the events in the Rosenstrasse, was deeply concerned about the consequences of such a "disagreeable scene" on morale, and

eventually relented to the unarmed street protesters. The murder of another 2,000 Jews was not worth the popular upset it might cause a regime desperately concerned about morale during "total war".

Stoltzfus' book contains just about everything a publisher could want in a text about Nazi Germany: sadistic SS men, Jewish victims, courageous women standing up for their husbands, a vicious dictatorship backing off when confronted with popular protest, and a series of biographical portraits of mixed-marriage couples which personalize the story of persecution. Yet it would be wrong to dismiss this book with the arrogance that often accompanies scholarly assessments of books which threaten to reach a wider public. For one thing, although the biographical portraits occasionally seem rather clichéd, Stoltzfus uses them well to interweave the personal and the political narratives, to delineate the social and psychological background of the remarkable events of February 1943, and to remind us that what really matters about politics is how it affects individual human beings. For another, the story Stoltzfus tells is rather different from the black-and-white account in Goldhagen's bestseller. It is a story, as Stoltzfus emphasizes, of both courage and "compromises", of how Nazi pressure to prise people apart often drew them closer together, and of a resistance both remarkable and "limited to defending its own families."

Resistance of the Heart both provides a gripping account of what Nazi persecution meant to individual victims and highlights some of the most complex aspects of the Nazis' applied racism. At the time the war broke out, roughly one in ten of Germany's Jews was married to a non-Jew (a tendency which had been rising steadily until the Nazis took power), the majority of whom were Jewish men married to non-Jewish women. For a regime which viewed the world in racialist categories and embarked on a self-appointed mission to racially restructure Europe, "racially mixed" marriages should have been its first targets, not the last. The reason why this occurred, as Stoltzfus makes clear, was the Nazis' Achilles heel -- their fear of popular unrest.

The book does raise doubts, however. One concerns the rather uncritical way in which oral testimony given years after the event is discussed. Can we really accept as accurate the memories of participants in what was an incredibly dangerous and emotionally charged event, over four decades after it occurred? Were the Jewish families into which "Aryans" married always the sources of warmth and understanding that they remembered forty years later? Did they
really have no doubts about their decisions to remain loyal to their husbands? Such questions are all the more difficult to answer when, for example, an interviewee has known for over four decades what she did not know in the 1930s: that "Aryans" who bowed to the terrible pressure and divorced their Jewish spouses effectively condemned them to death. This points to a fundamental problem with all oral testimony: that (*pace* Paul Thompson) it is not "the voice of the past" but rather the way in which people (influenced by their own life histories, by how they imagine the world and how the incidents described have been discussed publicly) structure their memories of the past.

In addition, although he devotes much space to developments already well known and sometimes repeats himself, Stoltzfus, surprisingly, overlooks what happened to the institution of marriage in Nazi Germany generally. As Gabriele Czarnowski has recently shown, the Nazi regime was engaged in a project to apply racialist criteria not just to intermarriage between Germans and Jews but increasingly to all marriages in the Nazi "racial state", to regulate who should be allowed or encouraged to marry and who to divorce. This is a fascinating story, and a significant element of the general context of Stoltzfus' study.

Finally, the lesson which Nathan Stoltzfus seeks to draw from the Rosenstrasse Protest -- that "the regime's ideology might never have developed into genocide had the German people not attained for the regime a social isolation of the Jews, the prerequisite to mass murder" -- is at least open to question. Would public disquiet or disgust really have prevented those racist in high places, who regarded themselves as performing a task objectively necessary for the purification of the German people, from carrying out genocide? It may be comforting to believe in the potential of ordinary people to arrest evil in the most difficult of circumstances.

Unfortunately, however, there is a more depressing -- and to my mind more likely -- interpretation: that women of the
Rosenstrasse were able to save their husbands because, in the cold calculations of a Nazi leadership weighing up the costs and benefits of crushing the protest in early 1943, the incident was not seen as sufficiently important to merit the further trouble which deportation would have provoked. To extrapolate from the success of the Rosenstrasse protest to a general judgment about whether the machinery of mass murder could have been halted invokes a logic which, sadly, may be misplaced.
[Richard Bessel is Senior Lecturer in History at the Open University and author of *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism*, and *Life in the Third Reich*.]

Resistance and Intermarriage in Nazi Germany
Letters to the Editor
Times Literary Supplement, May 30

Sir, -- I agree with Richard Bessel's claim (May 16) that my book, Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse protest in Nazi Germany, makes arguments "at least open to question." I disagree, however, with his basis for this claim: that I have only "draw[n] these arguments from the Rosenstrasse Protest". Rosenstrasse is the climax of a long struggle of wills between the regime and intermarried couples. German "Aryans" married to Jews succeeded in rescuing thousands of Jews because, by the time of their desperate street protest, their non-compliance had already divided the Nazi leadership on how to handle intermarried Jews. Thus my thesis that the social isolation of the Jews was the first step towards genocide, and that the German people achieved this for the regime, does not at all rest on whether further protests against mass murder would have snatched more Jews from the jaws.

I agree also that Rosenstrasse was effective "because in the cold calculations of a Nazi leadership weighing up the costs and benefits of crushing the protest in early 1943" it wasn't worth it. This is, however, due in part to the reputations intermarried couples had earned. For ten grueling years these couples had survived with each other as the certainty of their survival diminished, step by step, year by year. Friends dropped away, jobs disappeared, living space dwindled, starvation loomed, persecution bore down (as the now classic diaries of Victor Klemperer illustrate so poignantly). The vast majority of intermarried "Aryans'" refused the exemption from these horrors which an easy divorce would have granted. Nazi leaders knew that they, unlike just about any other Germans, were willing to put their lives on the line, so that getting rid of them would be considerably more troublesome than scaring off just about any other group of Germans. Regardless of whether the success of intermarried German opposition in rescuing Jews is dated to Rosenstrasse or before, their non-compliance caused a conflict between Nazi ideology and its perceived policy options, influencing Hitler and the Gestapo to hesitate and repeatedly decide to "temporarily defer" deporting intermarried Jews -- until the war ended, when
intermarried Jews comprised 98 per cent of surviving German Jews registered with the Gestapo.

There are other contexts as well for understanding Rosenstrasse. The social history of recent decades is increasingly pushing issues of personal agency and responsibility on to centre-stage, as scholars look for the social footings of dictatorship, reassessing the role of ordinary people and their possibilities even in Nazi Germany. The history of intermarriage and Rosenstrasse helps to highlight characteristics of Nazi Germany that otherwise rest in shadows. The non-compliance-and-protest part of this history illuminates other cases of effective mass protest in Nazi Germany, particularly that surrounding the crucifix decrees and euthanasia. If, as Professor Bessel writes, "fear of unrest was the Nazis' Achilles heel", then unrest among more Germans than just those married to Jews might have been even more influential. Rosenstrasse in its context further hones our perception of the way the regime courted and maintained power, and the way it felt its power threatened.

NATHAN STOLTZFUS
c/o Norton, 10 Coptic Street, London WCI