

JOURNAL ARTICLE

# *No Past Tense: Love and Survival in the Shadow of the Holocaust*

**D. Z. Stone** 

*No Past Tense: Love and Survival in the Shadow of the Holocaust*, D. Z. Stone (Chicago, IL: Vallentine Mitchell, 2019), xvi + 272 pp., hardcover \$49.00, paperback \$22.95.

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Drawing on over one hundred hours of oral history interviews with Kati and Willi Salcer, D. Z. Stone has crafted a compelling biography of two Holocaust survivors, covering their lives from World War II and the founding of the State of Israel to the turbulent Vietnam War era in the United States. The biography tells the separate yet intertwined life stories of two Czech teenagers who met briefly in a ghetto and then reconnected after the war. It is at once an epic love story and an investigation into the ongoing effects of the Holocaust long after the end of the Second World War. This book is unique both in the story that it tells and the way that it tells it.

The Salcers were Czech Jews, whose homes were in the region transferred to Hungary during the war. Willi was sent to a Hungarian Jewish Labor Battalion Mobile Unit before his deportation to the Mauthausen and Gunskirchen concentration camps. Kati was sent to Auschwitz and then to the Lichtenau labor camp. After liberation both returned to their hometowns, and attempted to reclaim their family property and to reunite with one another. Faced with antisemitism stoked by the wartime German occupation, and with the increasingly oppressive Communist regime, the Salcers fled to Mandatory

Palestine. Once again, they rebuilt their lives, only to experience economic ruin, to rebuild again, and then to immigrate to the United States where they reconstructed their lives yet again. The willingness of the couple to discuss taboo topics, such as revenge, attempted suicide, fertility issues, and depression, contributes to the uniqueness of the narrative.

Although descriptions of revenge acts committed by Holocaust survivors can be found in recorded oral histories, it is rare for these experiences to appear in print. Kati mentions that she was on her way back to Czechoslovakia with other survivors when they spotted the head SS officer from Lichtenau. Stone lets Kati tell what happens in her own words; yet, Stone chooses to arrange the text in uneven lines reminiscent of poetry, using line breaks instead of punctuation. The technique suggests that Kati's voice was halting as she told of joining two male Polish political prisoners and two other women survivors in chasing down an SS man. When they caught him, the male prisoners dragged him to a tree. Kati continues, "When the noose was around his neck, I joined in/I held my hands on the rope/I pulled with everyone/I pulled and pulled until he was yanked dead/What did I feel?/Not the least bit of pity. Not a touch of remorse. No sympathy/For this man, all I felt was hatred/I wanted him dead/I wanted revenge" (p. 66). Kati says that later while walking through the woods continuing on her way to Czechoslovakia, "It was here I began to see the SS man's dying face/All the time/I was terrified/Afraid I had become a monster/Like him" (p. 67). When Stone tells Kati that she has located a photograph of the man, Kati says "If it is okay, I would rather not look/I do not need to see it/I still cannot forget his face" (p. 67). Kati is clearly troubled about her participation in the revenge attack, and yet she shares that experience and gives Stone permission to publish it when she could have avoided the topic all together. She is just as unflinching when discussing her suicide attempt, episodes of depression, and struggles as a parent. These passages give readers insight into the ongoing effects of trauma even as survivors created new lives for themselves. Rather than diminishing Kati and Willi's successes, these episodes highlight just how resilient these two survivors were.

Kati and Willi Salcer were among those survivors who for decades chose not to discuss their wartime experiences. Their memories would have been lost to us had they not agreed to their son's request to tell their life stories to Stone. Stone's professional background includes producing documentaries and working as a print journalist. She also earned a master's in anthropology from Columbia University, which informed her interviewing technique. As she explained: "interviewing the Salcers I would pull from ethnographic methods ... of 'thick description.' I would not only ask basic questions about names and dates, but questions that could provide meaningful context and a sense of place" (p. xiv). Her collaborative ethnographic approach also led her to make explicit the role that she played in the interviews and writing process. This book is deliberately not a ghost-written autobiography; it does not hide the influence of the professional writer. Rather, Stone is transparent in discussing the considerations that went into structuring the narrative and her evolving attitude toward the project. She also discusses ethical considerations, such as whether or not to tell Kati, who believed that her younger brother and their mother had been gassed together at Auschwitz, that a prisoner with her mother's name had also been at the Lichtenau labor camp. In the end, Willi decided to withhold the information from Kati and asked that it not be included in the book for as long as she lived (p. 135).

Extensive and frequent quotations from the interviews allow the reader to "hear" Kati and Willi directly. Reading their words, it is as if they are co-authors of the book, not simply subjects. Primary sources interspersed between the quotations both authenticate the survivors' memories and provide additional depth to the narrative. Willi's somewhat restrained description of his liberation at Gunskirchen is juxtaposed with an eyewitness account by a U.S. soldier, adding vivid details of the stench and muck. Stone records Willi's response to the document. His comment that what the soldier had written was correct is followed by a quick change of subject to the music that he likes to have playing in the background during their interviews. The passage effectively illustrates Willi's self-professed discomfort with discussing emotions. Stone's choices allow Willi's voice to come through while at the same time providing context.

In seeking to corroborate aspects of the Salcers' experiences, Stone uncovered evidence that resolved a source of ongoing pain for Kati. After liberation, anomalies in Kati's experiences led other survivors to treat her with suspicion. She said that she had been at Auschwitz, but had no tattoo on her arm, and she claimed that she had worked in an underground munitions facility beneath an undisturbed forest. Even Willi dismissed the underground factory as a product of traumatized memory. Stone investigated and discovered research by a German history teacher that confirmed Kati's account of being taken from a line to the gas chambers (explaining her lack of tattoo) to work at a munitions factory. The inmates that worked there were tricked into believing it was underground.

Written in an engaging style, *No Past Tense* tells a remarkable story of survival and resilience. Devoting two-thirds of the book to the Salcers' postwar lives, Stone demonstrates that the Salcers, and other survivors, cannot be defined by their Holocaust experiences alone. Although the shadow of the Holocaust remained, Kati and Willi continued to move forward. Their struggles to regain their family homes, their contributions to the founding of the State of Israel, their devotion to one another and their children, their ability to overcome a host of political and economic obstacles demonstrate that they were more than survivors. The discussion of taboo topics and its unique structure make this book a valuable addition to collections of Holocaust memoirs/biographies. I highly recommend *No Past Tense* to anyone with an interest in the aftermath of genocide and as a text for classes in Holocaust Studies, biography, and life writing.

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