

Agatha Hoff. *Burning Horses - A Hungarian Life Turned Upside Down*. El Paso, Texas: Sweet Earth Flying Press, 2010. 196 pp.

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It is 1944, Budapest is under German occupation. An SS Captain orders a woman to lick the sole of his boot, which is smeared with dog feces; he threatens her that unless she does his bidding, she will not see her children again. He knows that she is carrying funds for her Jewish cousin, who is upstairs in her apartment. She complies. This takes place in front of the Papal legation, where a column of Jews is lined up hoping to be admitted. When the deed is done, the SS officer drives off while the woman, left retching, resents the fact that none of the Jews watching her humiliation helped her. But the money is safe, as is her Jewish cousin and her daughters. This is but one of many possible yet improbable occurrences in Agatha Hoff's book, *Burning Horses*, a novelized autobiography of her mother, Eva, written in the first person. Eva was, until her death in 1992, a wonderful raconteur and Hoff acknowledges that though she tried to stay faithful to her mother's reminiscences and the written stories about the war that she left behind, these may have been selective, so she filled in the gaps about events which her mother chose not to relate.

Although Hoff says that she has only marginally placed the family's private story in the context of world events, nevertheless, the book could profit from tighter editing in two regards: verification of historical background and facts, and avoidance of overused melodramatic clichés such as "My life was over," "my heart sank," "I felt hollow inside," etc. In both these regards, two other recent books, one written by a daughter about her mother's role in hiding Jews in Budapest, *Deadly Carousel - A Singer's Story of the Second World War* (Monica Porter, 1990), and the other about the atrocious events in Budapest at the time, *When the Danube Ran Red* (Zsuzsanna Ozsvath, 2010), narrated from the vantage point of a child survivor, make good comparisons to *Burning Horses*.

The book aims to be a Holocaust narrative, but is in fact the story of a privileged Catholic woman of Jewish ancestry who becomes terrified of this stain on her persona. Eva Bodich, née Leopold, 1905, was baptized as a Catholic at birth, her parents having long ago converted from Judaism. As a child, however, she remembered her grandfather insisting on embarrassing the family by not converting, wearing a yarmulke, and using the Hebrew blessing, *L'khayim* (To Life!) at family occasions. When she asked about her grandfather, her parents ignored her questions and she overheard them saying that "what she doesn't know won't hurt her" (15). So Eva grew up comfortably Catholic, surrounded by servants, English governesses, great wealth, a loving but ineffectual father, and a controlling mother whose behavior bordered on child abuse. For example, in one instance the mother refuses to allow Eva to wear glasses though she has severely impaired vision, which made it impossible for Eva to take the painting lessons that she loved.



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In a style reminiscent of schoolgirl literature of the fifties, the reader is treated to endless descriptions of the colors and styles of Eva's wardrobe and the many social occasions at which she wore them, and eventually to her marriage to Joska Bodics, who, as is repeated throughout the book, enjoyed "excellent pedigree" but had no money. Though the writer claims that the Bodics family were aristocrats, reliable genealogical sources describe them as "gentry." Two girls were born to the couple; the younger, born in 1936, is the writer of this book. With a mansion, a 200-acre farm, *Cservölgy*, as well as an apartment in Buda for the "winter season." the family enjoyed a privileged life. When they ran low on cash, they would take in paying guests for the summer, guests who had been vetted, of course. One welcome couple, a General in the Hungarian Army, András Pici, and his wife Margit, who became close friends of the family, subsequently came to play a role in the family's wartime experiences. The author says that her father, an Assistant Curator at the Agricultural Museum, was denied promotions owing to his wife's religious roots, but there is no explanation as to why he is, nevertheless, later referred to as Curator and then Director. This is one of the many examples of the book's need for a tighter editing and smoothing out of numerous inconsistencies.

As the story unfolds, and the Jewish Laws come into effect, Eva becomes frightened, especially once her parents are crammed into a "Jewish House" in Budapest. It is never explained why she would not have been immediately sheltered by her husband's large, Catholic, and titled family, when with a brother-in-law who is a "high ranking Hungarian army officer" Eva would have been safe. Though Eva is described as a favored daughter-in-law, this seems doubtful in light of scenes such as the one in front of the Papal legation. Could this be one of those "subjects that were most painful to her" (9) that she chose not to relate and that Hoff chose to ignore rather than explore? Eva seems to believe, as did Hitler, that her genes were stronger than her upbringing, environment and religious affiliation. The unfolding of the story raises some questions regarding Eva's premise. Though the writer ignores this important issue, Eva seems to have had unresolved and conflicting emotions regarding her background. She accepts her ancestry, even confronting a member of a French conversation club who complains about members bringing their Jewish wives to functions. She procures false papers attesting to her being a fourth generation Catholic, yet she has no cognizance of the Jewish experience, never having had any connection to Jewish culture. Whenever Eva feels threatened or needs help she turns to those she trusts most, the nuns in convents, and at one point, fearing arrest, she takes refuge in the Papal legation, but then, oddly, decides to leave and take her chances.

The family suffered the hardships of war with the rest of the population, seeking refuge from bombs and suffering hunger, cold, fear, lice, and the witnessing of carnage. They were traumatized by several shocking events, two of which were the sight and sounds of trapped German cavalry horses aflame in the bombed building in which the family lived (the event which provides the title of the book) and the brutal killing, by a Soviet soldier, of a young German whom they tried to hide because he had been kind to the children. Eva's friend, General András Pici, is a leader in the underground. He, along with Eva's husband, Joska, and one of Joska's brothers sabotage the Germans, stave off the Russians and hope for the Americans to liberate Hungary. When the General is betrayed, Eva, "Who always tries to help" (101), finds him a hiding place. At the same time, she is "outraged" by her Jewish cousin Peter, for his "putting her family at great risk" by asking for her help in finding his mother in the ghetto. The General is caught by the SS and is tortured and killed. In the last days of the bloody siege of Budapest, Eva receives a summons to report to a collection center for Jews, but again, she takes refuge with

nuns and avoids deportation until the Soviet siege is successful and the Germans are defeated. In the aftermath of the war, Eva and her husband join the rest of the population in the frantic scramble for housing, food, and work. To ensure the wellbeing of her daughters, she places them temporarily in a Catholic convent that seems not to have been touched by the war. But the Soviet victory is a shock for the family. Joska, knowing that his privileged life is doomed under Soviet domination, feels that it is too much to bear and commits suicide.

Incredibly, *Cservölgy*, the family estate, was left untouched, and provides a safe postwar home for Eva's parents and the girls, while Eva finds work as a translator and English teacher. Soon she meets another Hungarian Hero of the Underground, Steven Molnar, a mysterious man, persecuted by the Russians and involved in intrigues with the Americans. By 1947, Molnar becomes Eva's next husband, with whom she escapes Hungary, after first sending the girls with hidden funds to safety in Switzerland. Finally, after a harrowing journey to the safety of Austria, when Eva feels that "Everything imaginable had already happened to me" (174), she gets a job processing other refugees for emigration. When Eva and her husband get their American visas, the girls are again put into the care of nuns, awaiting their own immigration papers. Eventually they arrive in America, sponsored by no other than Eva's Jewish cousin Peter.

Tragically, there were millions of casualties during WWII and many civilians as well as soldiers were victims of the war, but not necessarily of the Holocaust. Eva, in many senses, should be categorized as one of them rather than as a Jewish Holocaust survivor. Though Eva and her family suffered through the allied bombing and the siege of Budapest, their experiences can hardly be compared to those of most of the Hungarian Jewish population, which was decimated. Her immediate family stayed intact, her estate untouched, she still had means and, owing to her excellent knowledge of languages, she was able to provide for her family in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Despite Hoff's attempt at portraying Eva as a Jewish victim, her heart and mind remained those of a privileged Catholic elitist, acutely ignorant of the Jewish wartime experience, as shown in the following examples. After the Soviet victory, Eva is described as being horrified at the sight of "German bodies in the Danube" when those were, in fact, most likely the bodies of hundreds of Jews, tied together and shot into the river by the Hungarian Arrow Cross. But Eva shows no awareness of these atrocities, and is quoted as saying: "Soldiers of both the German and Russian armies were good to children" (134), something no Jew would say when a million and a half Jewish children were murdered by the Germans throughout Europe. Hoff also refers to the Soviets as "occupiers," whereas at that time Jews referred to them as "liberators."

It is only after Eva escapes Hungary that she finds out that all the Jews from *Cservölgy* were deported. It is left unexplained how she didn't see, when she went home after liberation, that there were no Jews left, or that she didn't look for any surviving family members. The author, as noted above, shows a rather sketchy knowledge of history, confusing dates and ascribing all atrocities to the Germans, ignoring the fact that it was only after March 19, 1944 that the SS became active in Hungary and that the Jewish Laws, confiscation of property, forced labor, and other measures had been inflicted upon Jews much earlier by the Hungarian government and its fascist arm, the Arrow Cross. Eva, or rather Hoff, shows the Hungarians in the best light possible, as resisters, including depicting a strong underground, even though Hungary was allied to Hitler and virulently anti-Semitic. In light of her apparent lifelong confusion about her ancestry, it is tragic-comic that in her old age, Eva sought and was refused admittance into a Jewish home for the elderly in San Francisco, because they did not consider her

Jewish, and that after her death, the Catholic cemetery in Budapest refused her ashes, because they did not consider her Catholic.

Although following a somewhat melodramatic plot structure of some "classical" stereotyped Holocaust narratives, Hoff attempts to paint her mother as a martyr of both the Holocaust and of the postwar Communist takeover and even as a victim of discrimination by both Jews and Gentiles. In fact, the unintended importance of her narrative is in its portrayal of the fate of a person with a complex identity. This disposition, combined with factors of style, including the protagonist's life style and the author's narrative style, helps create and sound the story and voices of people like Eva in World War II and the Holocaust. While all autobiography and memoir writers describe events, not all reflect on them or on their own role in them, and, sadly, in this recounting it seems that neither Eva in her oral storytelling nor her daughter in her writing two decades after her mother's death are able to do so. Unfortunately, for people who read this book and have no knowledge of the events of the time, this book can be seriously historically misleading. As Anne Roth discusses in her 2011 *Popular Trauma Culture*, what she terms "misery memoirs," a category in which this book sadly must be placed, are currently considered the largest growth sector in book publishing worldwide.