

Ozsvath, Zsuzsanna. *When the Danube Ran Red*. Syracuse University Press, 2010, 171 pp., Illus.

Mandel, Eva Marika. *Le Livre de Mana*. Paris, Glyphe 2009, 231 pp., Illus.

Roth, Marika. *All the Pretty Shoes; A Memoir of Survival and the Feminine Spirit* Wyatt McKenzie 2010, 254 pp., Illus.

Reviewed by Evi Blaikie, Freelance Writer.

Three new books, by three Hungarian women Holocaust survivors, demonstrate that there is still a compulsion to unburden oneself of traumatic childhood memories and about events that will soon pass from conscious memory to the history books. Perhaps the feeling of moral obligation to say everything that they feel has not been said propels them to pass on their experiences and to immortalize the memory of those who perished. The motives of the authors, all of whom were little girls at the time and spent the Holocaust in hiding, are different but urgent.

All three authors, by now older women, spent the German occupation in Budapest; they come from very different backgrounds. Zsuzsanna Ozsvath, author of *When the Danube Ran Red* is from an assimilated, professional, highly intellectual, small close-knit family, who fled the outlying countryside where Jews had almost no chance of escaping deportation and death. Eva Marika Mandel, author of *Le Livre de Mana*, written in French, hails from a large, multigenerational, tumultuous, loving, traditional Jewish family, where the gift of a carefree childhood was paramount. Marika Roth, *All the Pretty Shoes*, on the other hand, purports to be from a divorced and dysfunctional family seemingly devoid of Jewish experience.

A scholarly introduction to Ozsvath's book by David Patterson, is a treatise on the Nazi strategy to eradicate Jews and Judaism by killing the children, thereby eradicating the very possibility of any further germination, a stratagem that was to an extent successful. All three books attest to the fact that Jewish childhood died in Europe. Despite that, Judaism survived, morphing into a defiant and militant culture, that many believe, the rest of the world will never allow to assimilate.

When the Danube Ran Red is dedicated to a young Christian woman, Erzsébeth Fajó, whom the family took in during her early teens and who was instrumental in their survival. She is the ultimate Righteous Gentile, totally committed to the family, willing to share its fate, without ever considering that she has a choice. Ozsvath's story begins with a Polish refugee child, a friend of Ozsvath who has witnessed atrocities and whose tales of barbarity haunts the author throughout the book, hovering above the story, like an ominous cloud. Eventually Ozsvath herself becomes a witness to events very similar to those that she heard about from her young Polish friend years earlier.

Ozsvath's family considers itself assimilated, Hungarians first and Jews a distant second. For such Jews, the shock of being branded as "Jews marked for extermination" was far more traumatic than for those who identified themselves as Jews first, as they felt betrayed by "their" country. In Budapest, most Jews were assimilated, and refused to believe that what happened to Jews elsewhere could happen to them and this left most of them tragically unprepared both physically and emotionally for the horrendous events that engulfed them. Once the danger became obvious, Ozsvath's father spent his time running from place to place in the city, seemingly in utter confusion, attempting to find a safe place for his family. His various forays, against strict curfew regulations, are repetitious and chaotic, but precisely reflect the desperation,

chaos, and confusion of the times. Meanwhile in a crowded apartment house, designated for Jews only, where each room has to accommodate an entire family (the result of another humiliating anti-Jewish law), Ozsvath, her older brother, and the other children attempt to live a life of fantasy. These loved and pampered children come from a very sheltered middle class environment and the turmoil around them was frightening and bewildering to the extreme. They formed a society of children, putting on plays and writing stories. Ozsvath concentrated on her music, a major part of her life since early childhood, but soon practicing the piano became an obsession. 65 years later, she recalls each piece of music she played or imagined in her head during various life-threatening events. No matter where she hid, she always seemed to have had access to the classics, in which she immersed herself to escape the harsh reality. We don't know how precise a child's memory is but coping mechanisms are endless.

The ever-tightening noose in the latter part of 1944, forces the Ozsvath family to disperse, with Erzsébeth becoming ever more active in helping them in attempts to escape from the murderous fascists. The two months of the Soviet siege of Budapest before liberation culminate in a crescendo of life-threatening situations and narrow escapes. The family is finally reunited and safe but not before Ozsvath is traumatized by sights and experiences that no child should witness.

Zsuzsanna Ozsvath chronicles, almost day-by-day, the increasing danger and humiliations to Jewish life in Budapest in 1944. As a professor of Holocaust studies she is able to give authoritative and interesting historical information about the Hungarian Regent Horthy's potential reasons for allying himself with Hitler's Germany and subsequent deeds. While Ozsvath's book is an important and scholarly record it is also an account of her own and her family's experience of that time, which makes the abrupt ending, upon liberation by the Soviets, unsettling to the reader.

If Ozsvath's book were solely a historical account of the events in Budapest during the Holocaust, this sudden ending might be logical, but since it is also a personal history, it leaves one unsatisfied. The Holocaust cast its influence on children well after the war ended, and they were shaped by it. It was their legacy and one needs to hear the entire story. Ozsvath, naturally, became an academic. Did her music and her books remain her safety net? Did she ever consider another path? If she waited this long to tell the story, why did she not complete it? The aftereffects of the Holocaust on children are as much a part of their story as the time lived through it. Still, the book is a scholarly chronicle, informative and interesting. It juxtaposes the effects of the increasing and humiliating Jewish Laws against the human reactions they elicited. Ozsvath does add an epilogue, wherein she gives some brief information about the fate of the young people who appear in the book and with whom she shared her time in the crowded apartment house, and also about the uplifting deed of her father who adopted Erzsébeth Fajó after the war.

In complete contrast to Ozsvath, Roth's *All the Pretty Shoes* is difficult to evaluate as a "Holocaust Memoir". Though she was indeed in Budapest during that time, much of her memory seems to conflict with actual events. There are many inconsistencies, and the prose is, at best, mediocre. Memory is fickle, especially that of a child, but the many discrepancies are jarring and irritating. Roth's account of the events and family background are incongruous, even taking into account the turbulence of the times. The mother, an unwanted child, but a beauty, married at 17 to a much older, but charming gambler, gains entree to cultural elites, divorces and becomes engaged to a refugee Russian Baron, a "distant cousin of the Tsar", while dying of tuberculosis. Roth is left for some time with her desperately poor maternal grand -and great--

grandfathers in an area of Budapest, *Angyalföld*, where no Jews were known to live. Roth's loving father later rescues her from a convent where her mother had placed her, but he is deported and disappears. Her mother also dies and her family, who had also rejected her mother after her marriage, will have no part of Roth, ostensibly because they are afraid that she is infected with tuberculosis.

Roth's post-Holocaust history is no less enigmatic to say the least, than her childhood, and, sadly, she does not make for a sympathetic protagonist. She uses the Holocaust as a background for her later stories of a long series of sexual molestations, abuses, victimizations, and constant rejections, while seemingly oblivious to her own behavior, excusing her own malfeasances as necessary for survival, portraying herself only as a Perpetual Victim. True, we cannot expect every Holocaust memoir to be a story of redemption, and many child survivors were irreparably damaged, and often unable to establish appropriate family bonds, but we do expect a survivor to at least attempt to contribute to her own rehabilitation. To those child survivors who have struggled with childhood memories, loss of family, regaining a sense of dignity, a restoration of normalcy to their lives, educating themselves and their children, this memoir feels painfully diminishing.

The cover of Eva Marika Mandel's book, *Le Livre de Mana*, displaying seven portraits of the author at different times of her life, tells much about its author and less about the content. The smiling photographs convey happy images, but upon reading the book, one wonders how much pain the smiles are covering up. Mandel writes in a beautiful prose, in the present tense. This makes her writing immediate and personal, instantly drawing in the reader. She explains her need to write for "the little ones" who should know the story, since it is also theirs. Mandel's memoir starts off as a charming portrait of a large extended, boisterous, loving, chaotic, multigenerational practicing Jewish family, with grandmother at the helm. The family teeters on the edge of poverty, but the children are loved and pampered. The three cousins, who all live together, are close, playful, well brought up, innocent. There are wonderful old photographs, stories of country holidays and even description of the preparation and enjoyment of traditional foods. Life is wonderful for the children until one day they are attacked by young hooligans because they are Jews and they are thus brought face-to-face with irrational, rabid anti-Semitism. It is the first onslaught and the beginning of the fear that takes root and grows, as the plight of the Jews becomes ever more dangerous. As the tension mounts and the situation in Budapest becomes more desperate, the children's anxiety is intensified. The men, fathers and uncles, disappear in to forced labor battalions; hatred from neighbors flares; the worries of the adult women permeate the world of the children; bomb explosions are unnerving, as are the long nights in the cellars.

As in Ozsvath's story, here too, there is a Righteous Gentile, a man who attempts to save the family. He is the owner of the dry cleaning store who crams about 60 Jews into his cellar, trying his best to feed them all and keep them alive. Mandel writes of him, "Matyi, the little dry cleaner, is one of those rare beings who honor humanity." But Matyi is not able to save everyone. The Arrow Cross discovers the hiding place and Mandel tells of the horror of one day, January 17, 1945, which sees her mother wounded, her aunt shot to death, and her twelve-year old cousin witnessing the execution. The emotions that Mandel elicits from the reader in describing the horror are visceral; not easy to read without tears.

In contrast to the poignantly described experiences, the post-war segment of Mandel's book is disappointing. Though she has obviously lost her emotional balance and is floundering, she does not write about her feelings with the same immediacy found earlier, and the story

becomes a recitation of facts about her courtship, marriage, birth of her children. She does write about her loneliness, very much a part of the postwar child survivors' syndrome, but fails to explain why she did not turn to anyone, including her fiancé, later her husband, or her parents. This kind of reaction is not an unfamiliar aftermath to the Holocaust. Psychological care for children was not of primary importance after the war and the concept of "Childhood trauma" was not as yet a familiar term. The adults, themselves were traumatized, and were often unable to help. They thought that the best way to deal with life was to forget and start anew. Some children managed to cope, but many others had great difficulty, which continued throughout their lives. Mandel, for example, found herself incapable of continuing her studies after high school, even though she won a coveted scholarship, but she fails to explore her lack of motivation, and the subsequent story of her return to France from New York, her marriage, her eventual return to study, are pale compared to the first part of her book. However, Mandel does ask many unanswerable questions, among them "What humiliations are we willing to accept in order to live another few hours or days, at the most?" This question goes to the heart of the human condition and instincts.

Le Livre de Mana exudes an aching nostalgia for that world of large interdependent, Jewish family life. That world, where the children could always lay their heads on a grandmother's ample bosom, is irretrievably gone. Surviving members of European Jewish families were dispersed throughout the world and life continued in exile. The children, including the authors, grew up in that exile. They lost childhood, parents, home and culture; yet most of them, not only regained their footing, but have managed to follow personal and professional paths that might have been predicted for them had the Holocaust not happened. The questions then are: Have we become so immune to suffering and slaughter that we can recover in one generation? And at what cost? Has the mountain of Holocaust literature given any answer?