

alone makes his book must-reading—centers on a newspaper, the *Munich Post*, that relentlessly attacked Hitler before he came to power. “The running battle between Hitler and the courageous reporters and editors of the *Post*,” writes Rosenbaum, “is one of the great unreported dramas in the history of journalism—and a long-erased chapter in the chronology of attempts to explain Adolf Hitler.” The editors knew full well that Hitler was not just an adventurer but a fanatical ideologue. Rosenbaum shows that the newspaper produced numerous exposés of sexual scandals in the Nazi Party, and even a dispatch, on December 9, 1931, about a plan for the extermination of German Jews: “For the final solution of the Jewish question it is proposed to use the Jews in Germany for slave labor or for cultivation of the German swamps administered by a special SS division.” There is a bracing clarity to the *Post*’s portrayal of Hitler that seems to have gotten lost in much of the of modern scholarship so carefully chronicled by Rosenbaum.

—Jacob Heilbrunn

#### MY GERMAN QUESTION:

##### *Growing Up in Nazi Berlin.*

By Peter Gay. Yale Univ. Press. 208 pp. \$22.50

Historian Peter Gay introduces this memoir of his youth in Nazi Berlin and his family’s forced emigration with an epigraph from Christopher Marlowe’s *Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*: “Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.” In adding to the sky-high stack of Holocaust-related memoirs of recent years, the eminent chronicler of the Victorian era seeks to create something more complex and subtle than merely another tale of suffering. Gay wants to sketch two essentially interior landscapes: first, the psychological and behavioral effects of what he experienced during those years of ceaseless Nazi propaganda and gathering threat; second, the terrifying pressures and obstacles that allowed so many German Jews to wait in seeming passivity for disaster to strike.

The image of lambs-to-the-slaughter paralysis still angers him—although his father in fact mustered his nerve and got the family out in 1939. “‘It was all in *Mein Kampf*’ has long been the litany of our detractors, who, without an inkling of what uprooting oneself meant and how hard it was to read the signals, reproached me or my parents for not having packed up on January 30, 1933, and left the

country the same day,” Gay writes. This is one of the few passages where we glimpse the abiding rage that the Nazi experience instilled in him, together with an arsenal of ways to repress it. When he first stepped on American soil, “Berlin seemed far away, but that was an illusion; for years I would pick fragments of it from my skin as though I had wallowed among shards of broken glass.”

The rage and repression are his true subject. In showing how it really was—not just the wounds to the psyche but the psyche’s self-protective, shrinking responses—he will rebut the simple-minded critique of those who behaved as his parents did. But the approach doesn’t quite work. The author dwells at length on the details of his defiantly normal daily life between 1933 and 1939, when his parents finally won passage on a boat to Havana. (They ultimately joined relatives in the United States.) We hear of his many “strategies” for hiding from the storm outside—his obsessive stamp collecting and sports watching; his early, entirely ordinary sexual fantasies. But without corresponding details of the storm outside, these details are just that: ordinary.

Gay remains oddly reticent about the storm itself, as if still partly in the grip of the insulating strategies that served him so well. Though there are flashes of horror, most descriptions are carefully general: “Sly and gross in turn, the anti-Semitic propaganda campaigns, calculated to drive us to despair, were so incessant, so repetitious, so all-embracing that it was nearly impossible to escape them.” Many key moments have escaped his memory entirely, from what he did in the evening after seeing the devastation of Kristallnacht to how he felt the day in April 1938 when he was forced to leave school. And the crucial matter of how his parents made the decision to emigrate—how they balanced the terrors of staying with the terrors ahead—is, to the reader’s surprise, never directly discussed. Is it because Gay does not know what his parents, now deceased, were thinking in those dark times? Or is it some deeper reluctance?

In the afterword, he writes that the memoir has been “the least exhilarating” of his many writing projects, and that, contrary to cliché, plumbing his traumas has brought no catharsis. For the reader, too, this otherwise graceful work of analysis lacks the vividness that could create true empathy.

—Amy E. Schwartz