

Seix Barral Los Tres Mundos *Memorias*

Chil Rajchman

Treblinka

Epilogo de Vasili Grossman



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Chil Rajchman , Jorge Salveti (Translator) , Vasily Grossman (Epilogizer)

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En octubre de 1942, Chil Rajchman y su hermana fueron deportados a Treblinka, un campo de concentración pensado exclusivamente para el exterminio de judíos. Ella es enviada a la cámara de gas, y él es obligado a participar en la matanza: se encarga de rapar a las mujeres antes de ser ejecutadas o buscar dientes de oro entre los cadáveres. En agosto de 1943, después de una rebelión de los prisioneros, Rajchman escapa. Durante su huida escribió la historia de sus diez meses en Treblinka.

Redactadas en yidish, estas memorias permanecieron ocultas durante años, y sólo después de la muerte de su autor han visto la luz. Treblinka es un libro único, escrito en tiempo presente, con una urgencia y una inmediatez estremecedoras. Esta edición incluye el célebre texto de Vasili Grossman en el que se cuenta detalladamente cómo funcionó la maquinaria de destrucción del «infierno de Treblinka, en comparación con el cual, el de Dante resulta un juego inofensivo e inocente de Satán».

Treblinka Details

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From Reader Review Treblinka for online ebook

Efrem Sepulveda says

For those who advocate that man is inherently good should have those illusions put to rest with the reading of this short memoir of the suffering at Treblinka death camp (no it was NOT a labor camp). Chil Rajchman gives a harrowingly detailed account of the operations of the Treblinka camp in present day Poland. Day and night, this hell on earth revealed the ultimate in the sinful nature of man. Beatings, robberies, mass executions and overall misery were heaped on these people who were caught between the twin monsters of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union.

As for some details of the narrative, there was some doubt in the mind of Rajchman that the Katyn forest massacre could be carried out by anyone other than the Nazis, yet it was so, thus the Nazis did not corner the atrocity market. It is indeed a lesson to us that war can bring out the cruel beast in men. Murderers as Rajchman called the SS guards and allied Ukrainians, were not neanderthals, but rather educated men who went to universities and one was even an evangelical pastor. Rajchman was one of the few who survived the camp and lived to leave this message to us who cry for justice and yearn for peace.

The details of this book is left for you to read. Make no mistake, man is inherently evil and this is solid proof for that fact.

Soheila says

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Oana says

Like all Holocaust books, at one point the story becomes absurd, as if a surrealist wrote it. After all, how can a human being come up with tortures - so unimaginable to most good-hearted people - and then execute their perverse fantasies? How can anyone sane think up 10,000-15,000 murders in a day? Or grinding up 800,000 people's bones to hide all evidence?

This book especially sounds like de Sade's most notorious work - the Nazi obsession with numbers, the permission withheld for prisoners needing to do number two, the grotesque tortures.

Raichman calls the Nazi camp masters for what they were: murderers, he never refers to them as Germans or Nazis. Thus this simply told book sounds like a fable, with stock figures acting out morals for us. The introduction mentions how Raichman starts his memoir with the train taking him and his sister to Treblinka, while others in the train try to delude themselves that they are going to the Ukraine for a life of mere farming. This abrupt start to the story eliminates all life before as this new hellish life takes over almost immediately when the train empties its poor inmates at the station.

Indeed the book is about grossly frustrated small favours, none of which are granted. An old woman begs to have her hair shorn more slowly so she can walk to the gas chamber with her daughter who has more hair and will take longer. In the winter, the pretty young women kept outside in freezing temperatures for the Nazis to gawk at, they beg to be allowed in the warmth of gas chamber sooner. At the end of a twelve-hour workday, the Nazis demand an hour of happy songs from their slaves before they can get some soup and rest.

One of the reasons I recommend this book and others like it, is to remember what happened and to remember the victims. It is also important to read these books in order to be constantly aware of human rights violations, to make oneself a better guard against one's own inclination to cruelty and racism. We Canadians and Americans think that this can't happen here, but we are exactly the same people as the Germans of the 1930s and 1940s. We are just as capable of this if we let ourselves be swept into a maelstrom of knee-jerk reactions.

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

The Deepest Circle of Hell

I came across the name of Chil Rajchman fairly recently. It was while reading *The Road*, an anthology of the shorter writings, fiction and non-fiction, of Vasily Grossman, the author of *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows*. To be more exact it was in the appendices, the piece entitled *Grossman and Treblinka*.

Grossman, a Soviet Army war correspondent, was the first to gather material on the operation of Treblinka, an extermination facility close to Warsaw. The Nazis had done their best to cover the traces, destroying it completely in 1943. But by sifting through the evidence, including some personal testimony of those who lived near the camp, he was able to reconstruct it in *The Hell of Treblinka*, one of the earliest accounts of the death camp ever written, used by the prosecution in the trial of the main Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg.

People are generally more familiar with Auschwitz than Treblinka and the other Operation Reinhard death camps, so called after Reinhard Heydrich, one of the principle architects of the Holocaust. Auschwitz was its own particular hell and more people died there than at Treblinka or any other single facility, but the paradox is that there was a greater chance of survival if one was sent there. For Auschwitz was a major centre for slave labour as well as extermination.

Treblinka was pure death. Healthy or unhealthy, male or female, young or old, most people went straight to the gas. The few who escaped immediate extermination were set aside to serve as the adjutants of destruction. All the while they themselves were subject to the most gratuitous and sadistic treatment at the hands of the German and Ukrainian guards; all the while they could be visited by death on a whim and in an instant. In the end very few survived. One such was Chil Rajchman.

Rajchman escaped from Treblinka in August 1943 during a general camp uprising. In the ten months he had spent there he was employed in various tasks – shaving the heads of women about to be consigned to the gas chambers, sorting clothes, removing gold teeth and dentures from corpses, digging up the decaying bodies of the dead after the Nazis decided on cremation. These tasks were performed under constant lashings, exhortations to work faster, faster and faster.

Rajchman set his account of this life in death down in Yiddish in 1944. Thereafter he kept it by his side, deciding not to publish during his lifetime. He died in 2004. His testament *Treblinka: A Survivor's Guide*

was finally translated into English in 2011. It's the author's legacy to the world, a witness to bitterness and despair that I find almost impossible to comprehend.

Not a word is out of place. The style is stark and direct. Dante's vision of the Inferno is almost benign by contrast. To have seen this and not gone mad is astonishing; to have survived and not gone mad is astonishing; to have lived a normal life and not gone mad is astonishing. Words simply can't capture the importance of this unique document, at once a testament to the worst forms of human depravity and an expression of the highest form of human nobility, the nobility of a man who could survive a descent into the abyss.

At just over a hundred pages I read it this afternoon in a single sitting, in just over an hour. I could not stop. The horror is not new to me; it's the immediacy of the horror that Rajchman manages to convey that it makes it so utterly compelling. This is not a book to be enjoyed, but it is a book to be read.

In a way I think it was probably, for him, a kind of catharsis, too personal to be published on his lifetime, a way of coping and forgetting, a personal memory that could only be revealed after death when no further probing was possible. The very control he shows in his style, his economy of words, his total lack of embellishment, may very well have been the minimum that was possible to say. This is the top of the iceberg of horror, with so much unsaid, so much that is impossible to say, below.

The edition I have is the paperback version, published this year by Maclehose Press, translated by Solon Beinfeld and introduced by Samuel Moyn. It also includes Grossman's essay on Treblinka, another revelation if you are coming to it for the first time. I do have a criticism. I'm raising this with considerable reluctance especially as it has no bearing at all on the five star rating I give this book. But when it comes to the horrors inflicted by the Nazis I feel that the most pedantic forms of exactness are necessary, tight enough to prevent the deniers getting through the cracks.

Moyn, I regret to say, is not the complete master of his brief. It's completely wrong to suggest, as he does, that the western concentration camps, the 'non extermination' facilities, only became lethal in the last months of the war as the regime lost its ability to feed the prisoners. That may be true, to an extent, of Belsen, but it is most certainly not true of places like Dachau and, above all, Mauthausen.

No matter. It takes nothing away from a testimony that will both break your heart and leave you numb. There are things almost beyond the imagination. I am so sorry that Rajchman had to live through this horror. I'm so glad that he survived to tell his story, a fitting memorial to him and the countless thousands who did not.

Kbryna says

rather hard to rate this, because - "I liked it" is not an accurate representation of my reaction. Instead, I was appalled thoroughly, which means the book did its job. And as a piece of historical evidence, this is an incredible work; Rajchman is one of very few Jews to 1) arrive at Treblinka and not be killed 2) survive working at Treblinka and 3) survive the revolt and escape from Treblinka. As one of the dedicated death camps, existing solely to exterminate European Jews, Treblinka was kept largely undocumented by Nazis; part of Rajchman's work, in fact, consisted of making sure that all traces of dead bodies (even small bits of bone) were erased, reduced to the finest of fine ash, buried under sand and dirt. No Jew was supposed to make it out of Treblinka alive; the fact that Rajchman lived there for a *year* is miraculous enough. The fact

that he managed to escape and survive through to the end of the war (ultimately emigrating to Uruguay; he died in 2004, clearly having lived a long, and I fervently hope, a happy, life) and record his experiences in such clean prose is beyond miraculous.
Not recommended for casual or light reading, obviously.

Nicole Karlson says

This was by far the most difficult book I've read about the Holocaust to date. While I have heard all about what happened at the Treblinka death camp, reading this detailed, heartbreaking, gruesome, disturbing account of what Chil Rajchman survived there literally made me sick and it was devastating. This book tells the awful truth. The tale of the lives of the men who were forced to destroy the evidence the sadistic evil men that ran that camp wanted to hide. Hundreds of thousands of corpses they had to cut the hair from, remove from gas chambers, remove gold teeth from, bury in pits and cover with sand, only to dig them back up months later to burn them, etc, etc...

"The blood of tens of thousands of victims, unable to rest, thrust itself upwards to the surface."

And the whole time they are forced to do these horrific things, they are constantly whipped and starved. If they made a mistake or got a bruise or a cut on the face they would be forced to strip, stand in the pit, and get a bullet in the head. It is truly a miracle that anyone survived this HELL.

My heart was in my throat the entire book. I wept throughout the entire book. I was physically ill through the entire book. This is not a book to be enjoyed, but a book to learn from.

To quote Samuel Moyn, who wrote the preface, "That Rajchman bore witness to Treblinka's horrors and that his memoir has belatedly appeared is a gift, but it is a bleak and discomfiting testament, not a redemptive and uplifting one."

I couldn't agree more. I'm so glad I read this story, but damn, it was very hard to read. My heart is heavy tonight. It was the perfect way to remember the victims and survivors of this tragedy on Holocaust Memorial Day.

Ashley *Hufflepuff Kitten* says

I always find it difficult to rate memoirs, and especially Holocaust/WWII memoirs. The subject matter is something we've all learned about in history class and would probably rather not discuss more than we absolutely have to, and yet I still find myself drawn to these stories -- every single survivor's story deserves to be told and heard, just as every single victim deserves to be remembered.

Christine says

This book is very, very difficult to read but, like other first hand accounts of the Holocaust, it needs to be read, remembered, and shared with future generations

I think the author says it best in his last paragraph:

"Yes, I remained alive and find myself among free people. But I often ask myself why. Is it so that I might tell the world about the millions of innocent murdered victims, to be a witness to the innocent blood that was spilled by the hands of the murderers?"

I can't know exactly why Chil Rajchman was able to survive Treblinka but, that he lived and had the courage to tell his story is as important a contribution to humankind as any other.

Lorenzo Berardi says

Jean Amery, Tadeusz Borowski, Imre Kertesz, Primo Levi, Boris Pahor, Elie Wiesel...

The list of authors who survived Nazi concentration and extermination camps finding the strength to tell the world about them could have been longer. Had beautiful minds such as Janusz Korczak, Irene Nemirovsky and Antal Szerb not been among those drowned by the Holocaust, we could have had more masterful first hand accounts on the atrocities perpetrated in the lagers. And who knows how many strikingly important diaries and memories were shattered and burned.

For sixty-five years Chil Rajchman's memoirs were not included in any bibliography about the Holocaust. In fact, they were not even published and were kept in a drawer somewhere between the US and Uruguay where Rajchman died in 2004. Then someone opened that drawer, read those Yiddish written pages and translated them into French. It is likely that what had happened a few years ago with the notebooks of Irene Nemirovsky being rediscovered and becoming an international bestseller played a part in this process.

However, it must be stressed out that whereas Nemirovsky's unfinished 'Suite Française' was a work of fiction (even though deeply interconnected with history in its making), Rajchman's writings deal with the darkest reality human beings could find themselves in.

Rajchman doesn't tell us who he was, what he was doing, how he was taken and put on a cattle waggon on October 1942. What the author tells us is where he was brought: Treblinka.

Now, there are still many former Nazi concentration camps which can be visited nowadays. I've only been to Dachau that was the first KZ (Konzentrationslager) the Nazis converted into a death gearwheel and that visit still haunts me. Even though I'll never stop looking for Holocaust and concentration camps related diaries, memoirs, poems and - to some extent - novels, I don't feel like visiting another lager. The wickedness I perceived in Dachau was more than enough.

And yet, if I wanted to pull myself together to go and see the horrors of Treblinka, I would find no barbed wires, no iron gates, no turrets, no barracks, no gas chambers, no crematories. What I'd see is just an ample clearing in a thick forest with a few stone memorials dotting the barren landscape.

Unlike Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen Belsen, Majdanek and Sachsenhausen which were called 'concentration' or even 'labor' camps where Jewish and non Jewish prisoners had to work themselves to death, Treblinka (and Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmno) was an extermination camp.

Whereas luck, physical strength, inner determination and sometimes scheming could keep you alive in a

concentration lager, you had no chances to survive in an extermination camp. 99% of those who arrived to Treblinka were killed within a few hours. And this is the reason why the Nazis were so eager to leave no visible trace of such a hell on Earth. Before leaving Treblinka behind, the executioners meticulously razed the whole camp to the ground, burning hundreds of thousands of bodies and crushing their charred bones with bulldozers. They had the mass graves filled with soil and planted them with lupins. I don't know why the Nazis bothered to cover all that up, but it's a fact that no extermination camp in Poland was left behind untouched.

Chil Rajchman was among those few Jews who were left alive by the executioners to put the evil doings under the carpet. And he spares no unpleasant detail of what he had to do to survive in Treblinka. Cutting the hair of thousands of women on their way to the gas chambers, bringing out the dead bodies, putting corpses into deep graves and covering them with lime, extracting gold teeth and eventually destroying any proof of a gigantic methodical massacre.

As you might have understood this is an extremely difficult book to read through. Rajchman doesn't let you take a single breather and never hides his hatred for the Nazi executioners around him. At a first glance, the author doesn't show any hint of hope for his future, but looking between and beyond the sharp lines he left us, the anger and desperation of Rajchman gradually turn into the willingness to fight back. And that's what eventually happens with the prisoners planning an uprising within the camp leading to Chil Rajchman and others managing to escape from Treblinka.

'Treblinka - A Survivor's Memory' is an extraordinary document on human evilness taken from the bottom of the abyss it could lead us to and - at the same time - an exceptional story of human resilience that everyone might be aware of.

Helen says

I've met Jews who survived Auschwitz. I have never met anyone who survived Treblinka, never even heard of someone who survived. Now I know why. This book is a testament of unimaginable, incomprehensible horror.

Melissa says

Let's face it, a book about the Holocaust and its survivors are grim. It is a period in our world's history that is so undeniably wrong and filled with horror that to read any account is heart wrenching.

This is a very short read and I completed it in less than two hours. However, unlike other stories told on this subject this one did not bring me to tears, it is told in a pointedly direct manner and almost devoid of emotion. I dare not suggest that the experience was less emotive, it's just the way the story is told. In all fairness, I would expect any survivor of Treblinka, as there were very few, to process their time spent at this slaughter camp in a way that no other human who has not experienced the same atrocities could probably imagine. So to have the story (which was originally written in Yiddish and subsequently translated) to be blunt is almost welcoming. I am not sure if this particular account was shared more deeply on a different level if reading it would not leave the reader with nightmares.

So, after the war, there were very few eyewitnesses who could recount the horrors of Treblinka. This is the reason why Treblinka didn't surpass the infamy of Auschwitz. Only Jews that were able to survive death on arrival were those who were assigned to dispose off any traces of the corpses. Chil Rajchman was one of them.

'Treblinka: A Survivor's Memory' is the most harrowing account I have ever read of the atrocities committed by the Nazis in the concentration camps. And I should mention the fact that there were even Ukrainian guards (144 of them) along with the SS (100 numbers) at Treblinka who "ran" the camp.

So, why should anyone read this piece of history that might give them nightmares for a very longtime? Renowned Russian war reporter and writer Vasily Grossman lays it very aptly:

It is the writer's duty to tell the terrible truth, and it is a reader's civic duty to learn this truth. To turn away, to close one's eyes and walk past is to insult the memory of those who perished.
