

# Living submerged

To avoid the death camps, Marie Jalowicz went to great lengths amid harrowing circumstances, and barely survived **By Bernard Edinger**

**I WAS** born in occupied France during the Second World War, and there was not a single family meal in the decades which followed during which my mother or father did not bring up the subject of the Holocaust at least once.

Countless books have been written about the Shoah and I have read a good number of them.

But one of the most memorable memoirs of the period that I have read is “Underground in Berlin” by Marie Jalowicz Simon.

Born into an educated middle-class Jewish family in Berlin (her father was a lawyer), the author was a “U-boat” or submarine – living “*Untergetaucht*” (submerged). These were both terms for Jews hiding as non-Jews, in the German capital during World War II.

There were 163,000 Jews in Berlin when the Nazis took power in 1933. Many left before the war but 75,000 were still in the city in 1939. When the war ended, just 6,000 were still alive.

Three-quarters of these were married to non-Jews and they were spared – but only just – by Hitler’s maniacal racial purity laws that sent some to their deaths while letting others live. And then there were about 1,500 “U-boats.” Marie Jalowicz was one of them and her story is told in her memoir.

Initially drafted for compulsory factory labor, she decided in 1941, when she was 19, that she would never survive if she lived within the law. She left her place of



COURTESY DR. HERMANN SIMON

Marie Jalowicz eluded the Gestapo by using false identities and avoiding the neighborhoods where she grew up

tricts, changing her accent and manner of speech to blend in.

She was helped by people who generally did not know she was Jewish, though they often suspected that she was avoiding the law.

Some protected her for ideological reasons – mostly hardened communist working-class folk to whom she would be eternally grateful.

One of those who helped shelter her, and who knew she was Jewish, passed her off to fellow communists as a “Russian girl parachutist” to win their sympathies.

Others protected her for more selfish reasons: She served them in return as housekeeper, cook, carer of the elderly and sex slave.

compulsory work and her home after her father’s death from natural causes that year (her mother had died before the war), but still lived under her real identity until June 1942, when she narrowly escaped arrest by the Gestapo.

In order to survive, she went further underground. She avoided the neighborhoods where she had grown up, and where she could have been recognized, and lived under false identities in rough, working-class dis-

“When reading her story we realize that history was not black or white but gray,” her son Hermann Simon said at the recent launch of the French edition of the book, titled “Clandestine.” The original German edition, “*Untergetaucht*,” was published in 2015.

“No one helped her for nothing. They did not ask this good-looking young woman for money because she had no money,” Mr. Simon, a historian and the director of the New Synagogue Berlin Foundation,

told an audience at the Paris Mémorial de la Shoah, France's central Holocaust museum and archive.

His mother's experiences included escaping from the Gestapo when they came to arrest her in her room, and undergoing a painful self-induced abortion sitting on a bucket in a secluded outdoor garden.

She was engaged to a Chinese man and then a Bulgarian in failed efforts to get out of Nazi Germany. She did reach Bulgaria, but was rapidly deported back to Nazi Germany because Bulgarian authorities rightly suspected that her papers were faked.

She lived for a while with a syphilitic, half-mad Nazi who fortunately had no sexual demands, and claimed as his most prized possession a hair from Hitler's dog.

She lived for two years with a tough Dutch blue-collar worker who saved her.

But he beat her regularly when he caught her reading books because he thought it distracted her from what he saw as her domestic duties toward him.

She wrote that having a black-eye blended in well in the rough-and-tumble areas where she hid.

Finally, she became one of the tens of thousands of women raped by the Soviet soldiers who captured Berlin in 1945.

After the war, she suffered a mental and physical breakdown and decided she did not have the strength to begin a new life elsewhere.

In 1948, she married Heinrich Simon, a classmate from her Berlin Jewish high school who had immigrated to prewar Palestine and joined the British Army. He came to see her in Berlin after the war and ultimately moved back there where they had two children, Hermann Simon and his sister.

She went to university and became a noted professor of the literary and cultural history of classical antiquity at East Berlin's Humboldt University.

Perhaps in recognition of the Communists who helped to save her life, she joined the East German Communist Party.

In an afterword to her book, Hermann Simon writes, "I never asked her whether she thought of herself as a Communist. She would probably have replied that politically she was on the Left. Being a member of the Jewish community and running a fun-

damentally kosher household did not represent any contradiction to her."

She nearly never spoke of her past.

But in a letter to a friend shortly after the war, she explained how she rationalized her decision to stay in Berlin. "I want to defuse the usual argument that pride doesn't allow us to live in the land of the gas chambers. Do you think that the mob anywhere else in the world, if their worst instincts had been clearly aroused, would have behaved any worse than the mob in Germany? Germans have murdered millions of Jews. But many Germans, risking their lives, made great sacrifices to help me."

Marie Jalowicz Simon dictated her memoirs to her son in the very last year of her life. She died in September 1998, at age 75.

Hermann Simon said his mother dictated 77 tapes of 60 to 90 minutes each and it took him years to put together the result, laboriously checking dates and names, and finding, he said, that his mother's memory had been absolutely crystal clear.

The mind boggles at some of the incidents recounted by the author. She tells of a Jewish woman household helper held in a Berlin train station just before being put aboard a train bound "eastwards," i.e. to death by gassing.

While there, the woman suffers from acute diarrhea and policemen allow her to go to the toilet. When she emerges, the train is gone.

The Gestapo agents escort her home, break the seals on the apartment door to let her in and tell her to report back to the station the next day.

The woman, not knowing what else to do or who could help her, returns as ordered and is sent to her death.

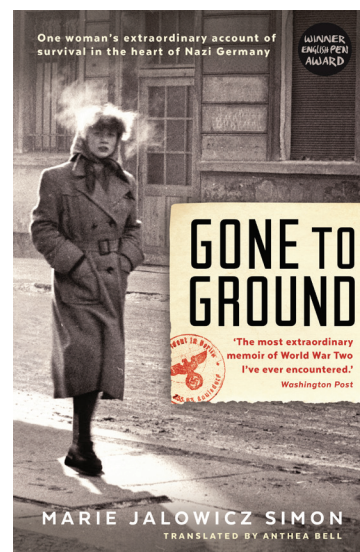
Then, there are the "greifers" (catchers), Jews to whom the Gestapo promised immunity from deportation in exchange for them prowling Berlin looking for fellow Jews to turn in.

Several of them became notorious, including Stella Goldschlag, nicknamed "The Blonde Ghost," who was probably responsible for hundreds of deaths but who survived a Soviet prison term after the war. Marie kept clear of other Jews because she suspected that some worked with the authorities.

There are very few light-hearted moments in these memoirs but the author recalls stay-

ing in her flat and trying to listen to foreign radio stations one morning when all the neighbors went down to shelters because of an Allied bombing raid.

"Suddenly, I heard a distant voice [in Hebrew]: *Po Yerushalayim* (This is Jerusalem). I knocked on the wall above the receiver and cried, "*Chaverim* (comrades), I'm shut up here with an impossible Dutchman in an apartment full of bugs belonging to a Nazi woman... But I want to live! I'm fighting. I'm doing my best to survive. *Shalom, shalom!*" ■



**Underground in Berlin: A Young Woman's Extraordinary Tale of Survival in the Heart of Nazi Germany**

Marie Jalowicz Simon  
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Books