

A Jew Must Die: A Novel Based on a True Story

Jacques Chessex

W. Donald Wilson, Translator

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Haunting. Disturbing. Very nearly true. *A Jew Must Die*, by Jacques Chessex, is a fictionalized account of the horrific murder of Arthur Bloch, a Jewish livestock dealer in the Swiss village of Payerne.

When Bloch is coaxed from Market Square to a quiet shed, he does not suspect that he has been selected for slaughter much as he selects animals for butchering. Bloch is well known, successful, and a devout Jew. The Nazis in Payerne have been urged to make an example of just such a person by the inflammatory diatribes of the Reverend Lugin, a cold-blooded instigator. The murderers intend Bloch's death to be a birthday tribute to Hitler. The reaction of Payerne's citizens is as disturbing as the method his killers use to dispose of Bloch's remains. The townspeople react to the disappearance of this well-liked individual with "sniggering, coarse jokes, and loaded comments."

The straightforward narrative style of *A Jew Must Die* contributes to its powerful effect. The facts do not need much elaboration. Readers familiar with Elie Wiesel's *Night* will recognize the drama of individual experience in the shadow of global events. Personal experience can be more revealing than a volume of statistics in understanding the social history of the 1930s and 1940s. Readers who hope to understand that time and glimpse the darkness of the human heart will find this brief book worthwhile. Translator W. Donald Wilson has accomplished a natural-sounding English translation from the French.

Jacques Chessex was eight years old, living in Payerne, Switzerland, in 1942, at the time of the real events that underlie this story. His father, the president of a local anti-Nazi club, was on the list of future victims compiled by Fernand Ischi, leader of the "garage gang" responsible for Arthur Bloch's murder.

Mr. Chessex, who died in October 2009 at age seventy-five, was a poet, essayist, and painter as well as a novelist. He was the first non-French citizen to receive the prestigious Prix Goncourt for his novel, *L'Ogre*. In 2007 he was awarded the Prix Jean Giorgio for his life's work. According to the obituary published in London's *Guardian*, his work focused on "revealing the darkly uncomfortable truths beneath the pristine surface of Swiss society." *A Jew Must Die* does just that.

GERALDINE A. RICHARDS (May / June 2010)

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