

Chopin through the Window

Franziska I. Stein

Amy Crews Cutts, Editor

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Crossing nations and historical periods, the memoir Chopin through the Window covers both unimaginable and everyday challenges.

Franziska I. Stein's eloquent memoir *Chopin through the Window* concerns hardships endured in the aftermath of World War II.

An ethnic German, Stein was born in 1922 in Bohemia, now the Czech Republic. Her early years were spent exploring Karlsbad and receiving love from her relatives. Such fond early memories are paired with bits of history for context, showing how Stein's family, like those of other Germans, hoped for a peaceful transition when the Sudetenland was first annexed.

The events surrounding Hitler's rise are placed in sections titled "perspectives" that suggest a general lack of information about the leader and his economic promises in the 1930s. Here, average Germans are said not to have suspected the full truth about the Nazis. Stein recalls that her family was terrified by the threat of denunciations; people were also swayed by propaganda, and some struggled with their day-to-day realities. There's no moralizing in hindsight; rather, Stein is matter-of-fact in saying that most people tended to avoid politics.

The beginning of the war is also covered with brisk efficiency. At eighteen, Stein is seen joining the Red Cross to fulfill her compulsory service; there, she met the Prussian soldier whom she later married. Personal concerns occupied her family's time; conversely, the horrors experienced by refugees are recounted in an understated manner, with a haunting note that time erases the worst details. The period after the war, when ethnic Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia, is covered in terms of general suffering; Stein notes that people were forced out regardless of their stances on the Nazis.

Stein's descriptions of locations are observant, and their changes echo her shifts in perception, which range from dismay to appreciation. As a narrator, Stein is measured and lucid: she comes across as determined, practical, and driven by necessity. She is sensitive in sharing her experiences as a wife and mother, and she complements her own experiences with evidence of research into pivotal conflicts and Allied responses during and after the war.

The book also covers pertinent regional issues in parallel with Stein's own tale, which follows her as she starts anew in post-war Berlin and moves to Colombia, where she worked in the hotel business and dealt with marital strains. She also ran a restaurant in Colorado, and she later returned to Berlin. However, the narration becomes more loose toward its end, and less precise about detailing the intersections of Stein's personal experiences with history.

Crossing nations and historical periods, the memoir *Chopin through the Window* covers both unimaginable and everyday challenges; it is strongest at preserving wartime memories.

KAREN RIGBY (November 23, 2021)

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