Clarion Review

Historical

He Went to Hell: It Was on His Way
Alexander Askanas
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Five Stars (out of Five)

"Is there something in our nature, the Poles and Jews living in this damned country, that makes [us] prone to brave and noble gestures that achieve nothing but our own death and destruction?" So asks David, the hero of Alexander Askanas' sad yet stirring novel of a Jewish resistance fighter in occupied Warsaw during World War II.

He Went to Hell is the story of men and women who fought back against oppression and tyranny, even when there was little hope of survival, let alone victory. There are stories of Jews hiding and being hidden in attics, closets, cellars, barns, sewers, and underground bunkers to escape the Gestapo and the death camps. The theme of Askanas' novel is not so much about fear but of courage in the face of fear. There are many moving sequences reminiscent of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Sophie's Choice*, and similar stories, as Askanas' characters refuse to go gently into the night.

He Went to Hell is about fighting back, but it is not just about heroism and courage. There are stories of betrayal by friends and allies: Even fellow Poles in the resistance who rape, murder, persecute, and deliver Jews to the Nazis, and a Russian Army content to sit idle across the Vistula River while democratic Polish forces in Warsaw are methodically crushed by German storm troopers.

The novel begins in 1943 as the Jewish Ghetto is being razed following a heroic but doomed uprising. The story focuses on one of the few fighters to escape that defeat, the young David Apfelbaum, and how he manages to survive in occupied Warsaw as a member of the underground Home Army resistance. David goes on raids, fights during the second and larger uprising of 1944, and then escapes Warsaw again, somehow managing to survive the war, only to find himself a target of persecution by the new forces of occupation: the Communists.

There are many sad and frightful incidents in the book, some of them presented in

David's feverish dreams. But while there is horror and heartbreak, there is also love, honor, and hope. Askanas has managed to pack a lot of emotion and action into 160 pages, and he does it beautifully. The cover is a bit amateurish, but other than a handful of typos and a few misplaced or misused words, the writing is clear and clean, and the prose is even poetic at times. Askanas writes beautifully. He makes the reader understand what it is to live in a city under siege, to be hunted and haunted and hungry and tempted to give into despair, but to somehow rise up each morning to try to survive for just one more day.

"Somebody has to live, somebody has to get even, and somebody has to tell what happened to us all," David tells his commander during the Ghetto uprising. Alexander Askanas is that "somebody" of which David speaks, and in *He Went to Hell*, Askanas does David and all members of the Polish resistance—Jew and Gentile alike—proud.

Mark McLaughlin