ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Isaac's Torah
Angel Wagenstein
Other Press
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Isaac's Torah (Other Press, 978-1-59051-245-6) is a very funny book about very sad events. Isaac Blumenfeld suffers at the hands of the Nazis, loses his entire family when his village is invaded, and is sent to a Siberian labor camp because of mistaken identity. But, incredibly, Bulgarian author Angel Wagenstein makes us laugh.

Naturally, Isaac would have much preferred a quiet life as a tailor, coming home to his wife and three children every day in their tiny village—which is at different times under the jurisdiction of three different ruling governments. But when history intervenes and sends him to various points of horror, he seems to be able to carry his home inside of him.

Two things contribute to this sense of placement. For one thing, his story is narrated as a series of letters to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Shmuel Ben-David. By fortuitous coincidence, the two old friends tend to meet up over years as if their lives were tangled and no amount of ripping or shredding could cut them completely asunder. Also, Isaac carries inside his head a party of commentators. For every occasion, a story about someone in a similar situation—or a completely different situation—comes to his mind and ekes onto the page: "Can you make the tiger eat grass…let alone keep a Jew from going off the straight path of his story…?" These stories and jokes make Wagenstein's narrative welcoming, as if, even amidst the horror, he's winking at his readers.

In *Isaac's Torah*, a small village changes the government it answers to, while the inhabitants continue to exist as before, to the best of their abilities.