



Not without a Fight: The Story of a Polish Jew's Resistance

D. W. Duke

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Loss is recounted with unsparing clarity in this important biographical tale.

D. W. Duke and Thomas Biebers's *Not Without a Fight: The Story of a Polish Jew's Resistance* is the lucid biography of the courageous Casimir "Cass" Bieberstein, whose aristocratic childhood was ruptured by the German invasion of Poland. The book is an affecting reminder of war's barbarism. From his father's mansion to the Warsaw ghetto, Cass's journey is one of remarkable resolve.

Early chapters depict nostalgic wonders, such as seasonal family traditions; scenes at the yeshiva; acts of violence, including a shooting during an outing on the family yacht; and, in one unexpected thread, the turnaround of a boy who befriends the Biebersteins despite having held anti-Semitic views.

Between rumor and truth on the Nazis' imminent invasion, Cass's innocence darkens. At times, recreated dialogue seems unusually formal, particularly among children. A tendency toward reportage emphasizes events while keeping Cass and his family at a distance.

It's not until the invasion of Poland in 1939 that Cass and the rest of the Biebersteins emerge as distinct individuals. Cass—who, at the time, was not even ten years old—is drawn as a perceptive child forced into maturity by circumstance.

Loss is recounted with unsparing clarity. Several sections alternate between Treblinka, where two of the Biebersteins' friends were sent, and the ghetto, where Cass, his brother, and others joined the Jewish Resistance. Moments of defiance amid futile circumstances build toward a final uprising.

A few uneven transitions provide background. These include a dramatic scene featuring Roosevelt and a letter by Einstein. When history is woven in the course of daily events, the writing strengthens—especially in passages that focus on the brutality Cass witnesses in the ghetto.

There's little sense that the biographers' twenty-first-century perspective has tinged the retelling. Humanity—even on the enemy's side—is given its fair due through moments that feature the family driver, who becomes a Nazi, and a sympathetic sergeant, both of whom offer aid at various junctures. The capacity for good and evil never falls along simple lines.

Cass's uncommon will stands out in one so young. Said to be touched by the hand of God, he survives a number of near-death experiences. Despite Cass's extensive training, marksmanship, and brief service in the Russian army, accounts of his acts of resistance seldom lapse into mythmaking; they're deftly narrated with a sobering tone, which lends the work its power.

Cass is not portrayed as an exceptional emblem of survival, and does not set out to be heroic. Rather, he's a palpably real boy under extreme duress who acts on instinct. Certain events also give him momentary pause, including the

killing of a Nazi using piano wire. The line begins to blur between what's done by necessity in self-defense and what borders on vicious, revealing how quickly war distorts order.

Not Without a Fight presents devastation through highly personalized experience. The Biebersteins always remain at the center. Without bitterness, their miraculous, inexplicable luck in avoiding separation and death results in a valuable testament to the human spirit.

KAREN RIGBY (December 11, 2017)

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