Clarion Review

Historical

Sarona
Helmut Glenk
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Four Stars (out of Five)

During the 1870s, small groups of religious Germans, the “Templers,” had begun to settle in the Sharon Plain north of the port of Jaffa, then a desolate and remote outpost of the Turkish Ottoman Empire; they sought to build a spiritual community, and their new settlement, Sarona, grew lush and fertile under their care. But by the 1880s, large groups of Jews began migrating to the Holy Land, fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe and Russia and influenced by the Zionist dream of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The German and Jewish settlers and their Arab neighbors co-existed peacefully in what had become a British Mandate Territory until the 1930s, when hostilities broke out between the British, Jews, and Arabs, and the rise of Nazism led to all Germans being regarded with ever-increasing suspicion.

When WWII began, Palestine’s German settlers were interned as Enemy Aliens, and were eventually deported and their lands appropriated. In 1947, the United Nations partitioned Palestine into Jewish and Arab sectors, and the British withdrew the following year. With the proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948, Sarona, re-named Hakirya, became the government center for the fledgling nation.

Helmut Glenk was born in an Australian internment camp to parents of German origin who had been deported from Sarona, and his story, set in Palestine and on the fields of war during the late 1930s and early 1940s, is a well-researched and deeply felt tribute to the community’s German settlers, enhanced by the fictional story of two young lovers separated by war.

Erich, a descendant of the German founders of Sarona, and Ruth, a Jewish descendant of early Zionist settlers, fall deeply in love, but must keep their relationship secret due to the growing tension between their people. Glenk carefully details the difficulties the two withstand, but his portrayal of the love between them lacks the passion and fire one would expect from two

teens in the throes of their first love. The dialogue between them is formal and rather stilted, and their behavior with each other appears enough under control that readers may experience surprise when it turns out that their last encounter before Erich departs for war has resulted in Ruth's pregnancy. What the author does offer, however, is a good, if somewhat analytical, perspective on the devastating effects of war on individuals, communities, and cultures, coupled with a hopeful affirmation of the resilience of the human spirit.

Those interested in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and how world events played their part in creating the situation that exists in the Middle East today are sure to learn from, and enjoy, Glenk's narrative. His well-paced story makes for a good historical read, even if his protagonists are less than compelling. No one in his generation could be better placed to write the story of Sarona than someone like Glenk, whose own life and legacy were so deeply affected by the events that transpired in that tumultuous time and place, and few writers could have stronger motivation to honor and preserve the memory of that courageous settlement and its people.

Sarona is Helmut Glenk's third book.

Kristine Morris