

Streets of Tears

Larry J. Hilton

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In the historical novel Streets of Tears, a Viennese family chooses to align with the Nazis, but it's a decision that haunts their future.

In Larry J. Hilton's historical novel *Streets of Tears*, a Viennese family supports Hitler and his regime, but the choice has consequences.

When World War II ends, Elke, who had a ranking position in Hitler's Bund Deutsches Mädel, has few good options. She doesn't want to be captured by the Austrian Resistance, or to deal with brutal Russian forces, so she flees toward American forces, who imprison her. A captain interrogates her to learn how otherwise cultured Europeans joined the Nazis in their unrepentant hatred for Jewish people. To him, Elke summarizes her upbringing and her early belief in Hitler's promises about Austria.

The novel is brisk and frank about establishing Elke's circumstances; her personality is not conveyed beyond these points, though. Her flat explanations of her past hint at how she absorbed the thinking of others. But her abrupt release from prison cuts the crucial interview short. She returns to Vienna, where her days are punctuated by other people's comments about the war, which are discussed at length.

Prefatory remarks begin each chapter; though sometimes informative, they are a point of distraction. They are part of the book's anthropological approach to the question of how people fell in with the Nazis. Beyond these themes, the story is dry in its execution: a Jewish author, for instance, is consulted about antisemitism in Austria, and responds with a monologue. Elsewhere, minor characters indulge in speeches and disclose their deprivations. Still: these realities are most compelling when Elke witnesses them for herself.

Sparse transitions between scenes—as with the use of a ghost-like vision to inspire Elke's thoughts about her father—result in disjointed chapters. Subsequent excursions across time cover World War I and everyday life in Vienna; rationing and a return to prosperity in the 1920s; politics in the 1930s; and key historical events, like Kristallnacht. As unrest increases, so too, does Hitler's appeal to the Viennese.

Vienna's former beauty haunts presentations of its present, war-torn situation, helping to establish a sense of lost civility and simultaneous resilience. Elke's former home is presented as a place of relative security. Meanwhile, Elke's refusal to believe that atrocities happened, despite being presented with evidence of them, is eerie, raising isolated questions concerning ideology and misinformation.

But the narrative is often too blunt and forceful about its perspectives, as when it intones that “when life is threatened and conditions harsh, values change” and “without food, life cannot exist.” This leads to added distance from Elke's story, which is often submerged by historical commentary—though still used to hint that there's hope that people can learn from their experiences.

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haunts their future.

KAREN RIGBY (June 1, 2022)

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