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Autobiography & Memoir

The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India
Urvashi Butalia
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For those seeking to understand the troubled history of India and Pakistan, and the current tensions that plague these neighboring nations, Butalia proffers a tremendous service. Historical accounts have long provided estimates of the numbers of refugees that crossed the newly-formed borders that divided Muslim Pakistan from Hindu India at the time of idependence in the late 1940s, along with references to the massacres, rapes, diseases and deaths that accompanied the exoduses.

Few of those histories, however, do more than hint at the effects such upheaval and suffering had on the lives of the survivors. Butalia's task is to tell "how families were divided, how friendships endured across borders, how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives, and indeed the cities and towns and villages they settled in." She succeeds admirably.

Butalia, a feminist activist and publisher whose own family was rift apart by the partition prior to her birth, recounts the stories of dozens of these ordinary people behind the statistics of those extraordinary times. Butalia begins with her mother—a Hindu who fled what had been her family's home for generations but had the misfortune of being in the new Pakistan—and her uncle—who stayed behind and converted to Islam to survive. Many of Butalia's interview subjects recall memories buried for fifty years, stories they had not even shared with close family members.

This book should be valuable for students of the Indian subcontinent and others interested in oral history, the major events of the twentieth century and the effects political decisions have in ordinary human lives.

Sharon Flesher