



The Warsaw Anagrams

Richard Zimler

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Wrenching and raw, *The Warsaw Anagrams* by Richard Zimler is an historical suspense novel as unique as it is compelling.

The book's narrator is the *ibbur* (Hebrew for "ghost" or "spirit") of Erik Cohen, once a well-respected psychiatrist in Poland. Cohen relays his story to Heniek Corben, who writes it down so the details will be preserved. The manuscript was "discovered" in Corben's floorboard in 2008 and, thus, Erik's history is unearthed for the first time.

Like 400,000 other Polish Jews in 1940, Erik is a prisoner in the Warsaw ghetto. He is forced to share cramped accommodations with his niece, Stefa, and his great-nephew, Adam. When Adam is found mutilated, Erik is determined to find the killer; but when he learns of other children in the ghetto who are also being disfigured, he teams up with his old friend Izzy and embarks on a dangerous quest.

Trying to process the reality of these violent deaths, Erik muses, "You realize that anything can happen; the sun may blacken and die before your eyes; a crack may open in the earth and swallow the street... Each heartbeat seems proof that all you see and feel is too improbable to be anything but a dream."

Tragedy begets sorrow, which begets even more tragedy, as Erik somberly learns during the novel's progression. While the Nazis certainly bring on the fear the characters experience, Erik comes to suspect that there is also a Jewish traitor in their midst.

This chilling novel explores themes of loss, survival, deprivation and the resilience of the human spirit; and while it contains several disturbing and graphic scenes essential to describing the horrors of ghetto life, Zimler's skill as a writer is without question: "They had sympathetic eyes and the same gaunt features we all had—starvation would make us all cousins before the Germans were through with us. Still, the whirring sounds of the sewing machines was reassuring—a noble percussion that meant: we Jews are fighting on."

The anagrams in the book's title refer to the scrambling of letters in names to guard identities—but the word puzzles end up resonating more deeply as the novel is resolved.

RICHARD ZIMLER (July / August 2011)

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