History

The Witness House: Nazis and Holocaust Survivors Sharing a Villa
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The history of World War II is so rich in character and detail that fiction presented alongside often pales in comparison, and this is especially true for a story so nuanced and taut as Kohl presents in *The Witness House*. The cast of characters, setting, and plot twists in the slim book are so extraordinary that, were they not entirely true, they simply could not be believed.

In 1945 and 1946, the revelations of the Nuremberg Trials sent shock waves across Europe that reverberated through the rest of the world. Another drama was taking place offstage in the witness house, the home where witnesses to the Holocaust were housed, and where neighboring rooms were as likely to hold the accused as they were the victims. Using considerable research, Kohl presents the tales of witnesses and defendants, called to Nuremberg to testify after Germany's defeat, who stayed together under one roof as they waited to receive justice.

Kohl chronicles a wide range of characters, and some of the war's most famous names appear in the witness house's guest book: Heinrich Hoffman, the gentleman photographer who boasted of his exclusive access to Hitler even while awaiting sentencing; Erwin Lahousen, German General and Resistance leader; Rudolf Diels, the beguiling founder of the Gestapo. All guests were entertained by Ingeborg Kálnoky, the beautiful, homeless countess who found shelter in the most unlikely lodging, and dutifully recorded her experience.

Interestingly, what countess Kálnoky leaves out of her narration is often as telling as what is written. Former Nazi officials charm her regularly with their aristocratic airs and refined manners, while the victims, many of whom have not fully recovered, are given little more than a passing mention. One is described only with: "The man had hardly any teeth left, and showed me the scars of dog bites on his legs."

But it was the quiet men and women moving in the background who held the final power. As the verdicts are rendered, the German defendants begin to realize they cannot bluff

forever. Kohl captures the efforts and failures of these criminals as they try to cover up their crimes in the dusk of Nazi Germany's empire, illuminating an intriguing time and place in history and adding another chapter to a large narrative that continues to grow, a history rich in color and tragedy, with stories still left to tell that are often more startling than any fiction.

Michael Beeman