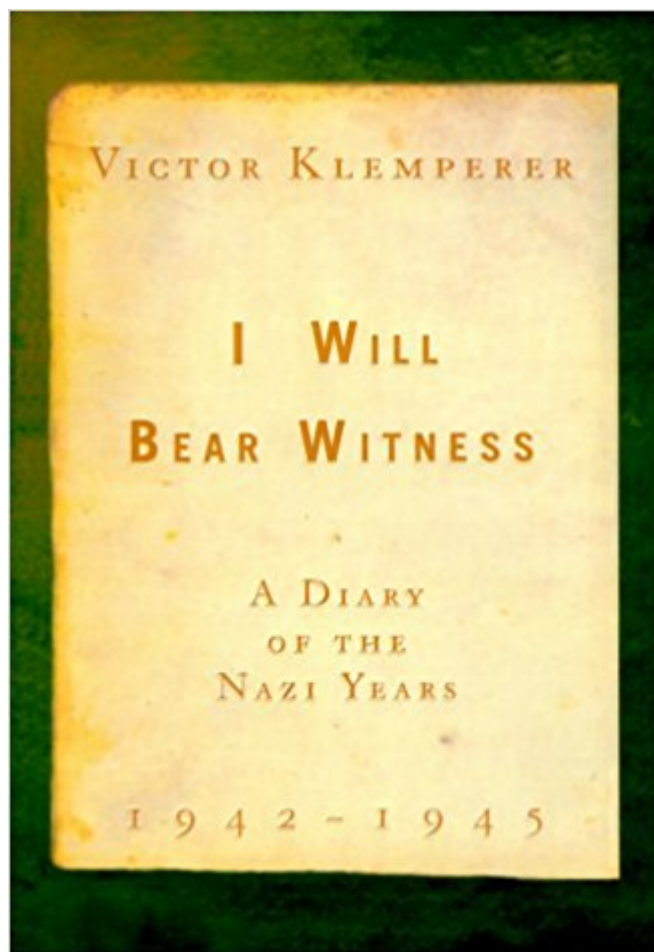


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I Will Bear Witness: A Diary Of The Nazi Years, 1942-1945



Synopsis

"The best written, most evocative, most observant record of daily life in the Third Reich." —Amos Elon, *The New York Times* — Victor Klemperer risked his life to preserve these diaries so that he could, as he wrote, "bear witness" to the gathering horror of the Nazi regime. The son of a Berlin rabbi, Klemperer was a German patriot who served with honor during the First World War, married a gentile, and converted to Protestantism. He was a professor of Romance languages at the Dresden Technical Institute, a fine scholar and writer, and an intellectual of a somewhat conservative disposition. Unlike many of his Jewish friends and academic colleagues, he feared Hitler from the start, and though he felt little allegiance to any religion, under Nazi law he was a Jew. In the years 1933 to 1941, covered in the first volume of these diaries, Klemperer's life is not yet in danger, but he loses his professorship, his house, even his typewriter; he is not allowed to drive, and since Jews are forbidden to own pets, he must put his cat to death. Because of his military record and marriage to a "full-blooded Aryan," he is spared deportation, but nevertheless, Klemperer has to wear the yellow Jewish star, and he and his wife, Eva, are subjected to the ever-increasing escalation of Nazi tyranny. The distinguished historian Peter Gay, in *The New York Times Book Review*, wrote that Klemperer's "personal history of how the Third Reich month by month, sometimes week by week, accelerated its crusade against the Jews gives as accurate a picture of Nazi trickery and brutality as we are likely to have...a report from the interior that tells the horrifying story of the evolving Nazi persecution...with a concrete, vivid power that is, and I think will remain, unsurpassed." This volume begins in 1942, the year of the Final Solution, and ends in 1945, with the devastation of Hitler's Germany. Rumors of the death camps soon reach the Jews of Dresden, now jammed into their so-called Jews' houses, starved, humiliated, subject day and night to Gestapo raids, and terrified as, one by one, their neighbors are taken away. Klemperer is made to shovel snow, is assigned to do forced labor in a factory, is taunted on the streets by gangs of boys, but his life is spared, thanks to the privileged status of Jews married to Aryans. In the final days of the war, however, even Jews in mixed marriages are summoned to report for transport to "labor camps," which Klemperer now knows means death, and that his turn will soon come. He is saved by the great Dresden air raid of February 13, 1945; he and his wife survive the fiery destruction of their city and make their way to the Allied lines. "In the enthralling and appalling final pages of this miraculous work," wrote Niall Ferguson in the *London Sunday Telegraph*, "Klemperer all too soon encounters the deliberate amnesia of the defeated Germany: 'What is "Gestapo"?' declares a Breslau woman he encounters in May 1945. 'I've never heard the word. I've never been interested in politics, I don't know anything about the persecution of the Jews.'" Says Ferguson, "Of all the books I have read on this subject, I

find it hard to think of one which has taught me more."Â Â

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Customer Reviews

The second volume of Victor Klemperer's searing diary, kept in secret during the 12 years he suffered under the Nazi regime, covers the period from 1942 to 1945. The humiliations visited on even such "privileged" Jews as Klemperer (whose wife was Aryan) grew increasingly severe, with house searches, arbitrary arrests, and brutal beatings becoming virtually routine. The 60-year-old historian is forced to shovel snow despite his heart condition; hunger gnaws at him as rations are mercilessly cut. Yet he clings to an intellectual life, continuing his reading and making notes on the lies and obfuscations of official Nazi discourse that would become his postwar masterpiece, *Lingua Tertii Imperii*. "The Russians, who have only just been annihilated, are tremendous and quite inexhaustible opponents," he notes sardonically after reading a mendacious fascist article in 1942. His lengthy account of his escape with his wife from Dresden after the Allied bombings of 1945 unforgettably captures the chaos of World War II's final days and the mixed feelings of a Jew who could never wholeheartedly gloat over the defeat of the nation that had persecuted him. Above all, his unflinching depiction of human nature and society in extremis amply justifies his cherished belief that even the Nazis "cannot prevent language from testifying to the truth." --Wendy Smith

This second volume of Klemperer's diary of the Nazi years confirms its place alongside Anne Frank's diary and Elie Wiesel's *Night* in the pantheon of Holocaust literature. Yet in many ways it is a more valuable source for the historian and general reader, as Klemperer gives the most finely

detailed and intricately delineated portrait of the Nazi era for the man-in-the-street. Granted, as a Jew married to an "Aryan" woman, and with his incredible capacity to see what his fellow Germans couldn't or wouldn't see, Klemperer was no ordinary German. Rather, he was an ordinary man in his desire to live freely--and in his empathy. The defining characteristic of the diary is how he maintains a capacity for the human in the face of the barbaric. On the first day of the new year 1942, Klemperer writes: "It is said children still have a sense of wonder, later one becomes blunted.--Nonsense. A child takes things for granted, and most people get no further; only an old person, who thinks, is aware of the wondrous." Exactly one year later he writes: "The paper shortage is so great that I was unable to come by a block calendar.... I miss the calendar more than I can say. Time stands still." From paper shortages to the suicides of 3,000-4,000 Jews in the autumn of 1941 when the meaning of deportation was starting to sink in, there is no better portrayal of daily life for the Jews in Nazi Germany. As a philologist, Klemperer was engaged in a meticulous and revealing study of the Nazi lexicon. This study was interrupted by his forced labor (April 1943-June 1944), but the compulsory work was mitigated by the impending Nazi defeat. The Allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945 is recounted in dramatic, breathless fashion over the course of eight pages. The bombing permits Klemperer to escape the fate of other European Jews and throws him and his wife into a strange journey through the German countryside during the spring and summer of 1945. Klemperer states that their return to Dresden was "a fairytale." They were greeted by an old man who lost his wife and whose dog had been stolen by the Russians, and by their neighbor, Frau Glaser, who welcomed them with "tears and kisses." In its depiction of the great and small injustices and barbarities of living under the Nazis, Klemperer's diary is a timeless piece of literature. (Mar.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I devoured the roughly 1500 pages of Victor Klemperer's diary 1933-1945 in the German original in four consecutive days and nights. What grips one is the question how Klemperer, an identifiable Jew, could have survived the Third Reich in the face of the horrendous persecution of the Jews which his diary shows closing in on him from all sides, and still be alive at the end of the Second World War viz the second volume of the book. What saved him was favorable coincidents -- so many of them that they would appear improbable in a work of fiction. On some occasions, his marriage to a Christian wife, a concert pianist, worked in his favor; on others, the courage of friends of the family, like the dentist, who dared to hide Klemperer's completed diary pages in her home - despite the danger of Gestapo raids - to save them for posterity; at other points the leniency of an official helped (Klemperer's World-War-I-medal for bravery, or his renown as a Professor of Romance

Philology tended to summon respect). In this second volume, it is shown how humiliations for Jews went from bad to worse as the War climaxed. Jews e.g. were no longer permitted to use a seat when they rode in a tram. On one occasion, when Klemperer was on a tram-platform (where he was permitted to stand), the tramdriver addressed him in a sympathetic fashion saying: "What a relief to see your yellow star. At last someone to talk to openly in this moronic madness of a War." By a near miracle, Klemperer and his wife survived the Dresden air raid in February 1945, and his wife pulled the yellow star off him; he then survived the remainder of the war by posturing as an "Aryan" who lost all his identification. My mother used to say: "No matter what I can tell you about the Third Reich, you won't be able to realize its real atmosphere. Life under that dictatorship is not transmittable by mere words." The sensation is that Klemperer's diaries do transmit that atmosphere, and in enormously precise words. The authenticity of the account arises from the peculiar perspective of a diarist, who, at any given point, possesses neither a privileged view of the future, nor easy hindsight-cleverness. An example is Klemperer's poignant account of the deportation of the Dresden Jews. Trembling he might be with the next transport, he was at pains to gather all available information, but with little success. The fate of the deported was strictly prohibited knowledge, and rumors were ineffectual in this era of universal mutual distrust. Klemperer surmises, no sooner than three years into the War, that they probably all get killed. Auschwitz especially, he suspects, must be a slaughterhouse. But only after the end of the war he learns that the number of victims runs to the millions, that some people were read out for immediate destruction at the trains' arrival ramps, that people were purposefully annihilated by forced labor and hunger, by medical experiments, and gassings. Klemperer's portrayal of the non-Jewish Germans permits no easy generalizations. By at least as great a number of his German compatriots was he shown friendliness as unfriendliness. The behavior of the civilians was frequently tolerable, the chicanery and humiliations typically coming from the uniformed representatives of the suppressors, as the Gestapo. Heinous behavior was shown by the Hitler Youth in toto, a group into whom the fear and hatred of Jews was drilled unremittingly from the tenderest age by the Party Youth organization, which often caused rifts in families where no such fanaticism had originally ruled. This is certainly an account of history from which one can learn - important both for Germany in particular and for mankind in general, as a portrayal of human behavior under a terrible dictatorship, in which the varnish of human civilization cracked, and man stood revealed as the beast he can be. The book's instructive power lies in its precision; it is the most authentic book I ever read about the Third Reich.

As with Volume One (see my review), the most disarming and appealing feature of this tome is its

slow and ineluctable building of suspense and empathy as World War I veteran Klemperer steadily weaves the day to day details of his life in Nazi Germany in the 12 years of that regime into a portrait of a rogue state moving irresistably down the path to tyranny and terror. The reader is sucked into the vortex of what it is like to live under such circumstances, where an aging Jewish professor who has built a life of purpose and meaning based on scholarship, hard work, and the belief in the rationalism of the state begins to understand that it will all unravel around him. As the story continues here, the years of tyranny of National Socialism reach their climax, so that Klemperer, a Jew married to an Aryan woman, increasingly finds solace and relief from the growing insanity swirling around him by concentrating on his academic writing, which he continues against all odds. Even the most simple and basic freedoms are denied them, so his refusal to submit to the progressively more invective growth of lies, invectives, and accusations of the Nazi regime build into a quiet resolve to resist in the way he knows best, by maintaining an intelligent, insightful, and careful witness to the everyday horrors perpetrated with malice and cunning on the Jews as the scapegoat for all of Germany's post-WWI social and economic woes. One reads in horror as Victor and Eva continue to be persecuted and systematically stripped of everything of meaning to them; their house, car, telephone, typewriter, even their beloved cat. While he understands all too well the dangers for him and his family, he consistently resists the increasingly strident pleas from family members for him to emigrate primarily because he identifies himself first and foremost as a German, and he refuses to abandon the Fatherland to the beastial likes of Hitler and the Nazis. One's sense of horror is magnified by his careful attention to the day to day details of living in the regime, the difficulties in finding socks, or clothing, or a cobbler, or vegetables, coffee, tobacco (both he and Eva are smokers), dealing with increasingly restrictive curfews, the ordeal and shame associated with the enforced wearing of the yellow star of David, the progressive acts of enforced segregation from the general populace, the occasional experiences at degradation at the hands of a youthful crowd of Hitler Youth. Yet there is great humanity evidenced here, both within the Jewish community and without it. The pathos of ordinary people caught in the web of a totalitarian state is made quite clear; unlike other academics who recently have argued in belief of a generalized and universalized hate on the part of ordinary Germans leading to their willing complicity in the persecution of Jews, Klemperer offers almost daily testimony of the unending acts of kindness, generosity, and personal risks that everyday citizens take to help and assist Jews to survive against the dictates of the totalitarian regime. Again and again he is given free food, extra provisions, someone looking deliberately the other way when they did so at personal risk. In sum, Klemperer seems to acknowledge that life in Nazi Germany was a hell for all of the citizens, Jew and non-Jew alike. He

pointedly gives credit to all the Aryans who assist Eva and him as they flee from the Nazis into the more anonymous countryside in the tumult and confusion caused by the firebombing of Dresden. This, like the first volume, is a book that should become required reading for college students in world history.

Unique contemporaneous account of life in Nazi Germany, by an assimilated Jewish professor who survived (barely) due to his marriage to an "Aryan" woman. His intent was to capture everyday life in Dresden and not events outside his direct observation. End-notes are selective, with the assumption that the reader has some basic familiarity with the history of the Third Reich. I would recommend reading the recent Richard Evans trilogy as an excellent general history of Weimar and Third Reich Germany.

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