

BOOK REVIEWS

AN INTERRUPTED LIFE - THE DIARIES OF ETTY HILLESUM.

By Etty Hillesum. Introduced by J.G. Gaarlandt. Pantheon Books, 1983. 226 pp. \$12.95.

Very often when we read an account of an event with which we are familiar and know well the outcome, we nevertheless become so absorbed in the creation we forget how it all comes out. We have to stop, to remind ourselves — sometimes with an awful jolt, as in the *Diary of Anne Frank* — what actually happened at the end. *An Interrupted Life* presents an entirely different perspective. We start with the knowledge of Etty's death in Auschwitz. We know from the outset that the diaries were written from 1941 to 1943 during the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam and later in Westerbork, an embarkation and concentration camp in Holland. But there is little in the beginning of the book that gives us a sense of the hideous events and fears of that time.

Instead of being drawn into the concrete world of 1941, where anxious Jews of Amsterdam awaited orders for transport or sought means to escape and hide, we share the observations and dreams of a disembodied, troubled spirit, floating outside of time. Etty's journal is a confession of her longings, an examination of her spiritual agonies, her confusions, her attachments and her profound wish to become a better person and to improve the human race. We are struck by the incongruity of the condition; our vision is split: The scene is viewed as a current happening through hindsight spectacles.

This is not to denigrate the book of its importance, or to mock Etty's noble aspirations. It is indeed a remarkable book written by an intelligent, sentient woman. It is remarkable on many levels, revealing both an unexpected contemporaneity and what in our age unfortunately is regarded an irrelevant innocence.

Etty, at 27, when the journal entries begin, is living in a kind of commune made up of a loosely related group of people. After many years of recurrent depression and psychological turmoil, after a succession of love affairs and repeated beginnings of a professional career, Etty is now receiving instruction from a charismatic psychologist-philosopher, whose mixture of physical practices, psychological tech-

niques, religion, ethics and humanism as well as the intense patient-therapist involvement are reminiscent both of various pre-World War II European psychiatric movements and those that proliferated in the Sixties and continue today, often led by gurus and exotic religious leaders.

The love between Etty and Spier (her leader) is spiritual, physical and self-sacrificing. Perfectibility is the ideal. People are essentially good, they believe; one must seek out their essence, rekindle the spark of decency that is contained, no matter how cunningly concealed, in every human being. "You cannot heal disturbed people without love." Humility and a strong belief in God are essential to peace and happiness.

Etty leads a rigorous and spartan life. She reads and rereads Rilke, Russian novelists, the Bible, Jung, Adler, St. Augustine. She exercises, gives Russian lessons and translates, helps with housekeeping and carries out secretarial duties for Spier. Nevertheless, she berates herself relentlessly for her weakness and doubts.

At times we wonder if Elsie Dinsmore lives on in Etty or if Etty is determined to be a non-affiliated saint. As a matter of fact, it never seems to occur to her that her Jewish background and connections present a contradiction or incongruity. Her religious explorations continue unimpeded by ambivalence. To her satisfaction she has resolved conflicts and arguments and evolved an ecumenical, eclectic religious credo that is principally Christian. "The girl who could not kneel," as she was once characterized, experiences as the months pass her greatest rapture and serenity when she kneels. "God, take me by Your hand . . . I shall try to spread some of my warmth, of my genuine love for others, wherever I go."

All this can sound suspiciously self-righteous, overly pious. It is not a fashionable point of view or a modish type of expression. To today's smart, cynical, burned too often before, Etty can appear either ingenuous or sly. But again, we must suspend judgment and incredulity. We must put aside what we already know. Etty's sincerity is convincing. In spite of increasing tensions in the world around her and its impingement on her private life, in spite of increasing prohibitions and hard-

ships and awareness of the inevitability of transport to an annihilation camp, Etty achieves greater peace and maturity and happiness than ever before in her life. "[To] have confidence that it will all come together and everything will turn out all right in the end. That confidence is something I've had for a long time."

In the summer of 1942 Etty volunteered to accompany the first group of Jews sent to Westerbork camp. In 1943 Etty was sent to Auschwitz where she died on November 30, 1943.

The diaries are important from several aspects. It is a reminder of the paradox, which never fails to surprise us, of personal growth and gratification in the midst of tragedy and impending catastrophe. The book is also a description of a mode of living among the artists and avant-garde intellectuals in metropolitan Europe. It brings that world to us out of history and into the present and familiar. Finally, the book is a testament of the tenacity and generosity of the human spirit. Despite a clear eye and cold evidence of a cruel world, Etty is convinced evil cannot triumph, not wholly and not forever. Etty may have been unduly optimistic but her diaries remain. And we are here to continue hoping.

— Regina Reibstein

ANNE'S YOUTH. By Frances Gladstone. Schocken, 1984. 113 pp. \$13.95.

This novel, dense with power, horror and the sexual nature of relationships between parent and child has the ring of horrible truth. What happens here: A child, obsessed with the inadequacies, and worse, the sexual brutalities of her father — though is it only her perception, or do those brutalities occur? — delineates that obsession with a vengeance. She abhors him, and yet, that abhorrence is scarred by fascination. She can't stop watching him (and he too may be watching her) as he works night after night, the tension between them mounting with her age. Though we never really know for sure if that tension is just hers, or if he too is skulking his prey, waiting for the moment when he can attack and repay her for her very existence.

The book's mother, Anne's mother, is full, sad, depressed, able to grab only

at the edges of things. She reads books about ideas that may be important, lying on her couch in the middle of the afternoon, falling asleep between sentences. Her underwear is all she has. It is large, torn, too grey to become white again. Her mother cries easily, for the life she was never able to have, for the life she just imagines.

Anne, the narrator/author, does not cry. Instead, she does something far worse; she traces, in detail that is made all the more horrible through its careful elaborateness (nothing can escape her, even the corners of her father's eyes), the way she is seduced — or is she? — by the person she hates the most in the world, her father, a man who is unable to truly conquer her soul.

Her consciousness is not rational, though her language, written as though truth could not be more clearly delineated, has the lucidity of a powerful revelation.

Anne has an aunt and uncle, Sara and Michael, and their lives are as horrible as the others she defines. Alone, together, barely able to do anything except eat meals that imitate one another — heavy, bland, tasteless — their lives too are airless, without hope, burdened with their own impossible anguish.

This is a book about pain, a Jewish book, written with a sensibility that is clear from the first sentence. This book is a long, painful, anguishing sigh. Its power is remarkable.

— Esther Cohen

VISIONS, IMAGES, AND DREAMS — YIDDISH FILM PAST AND PRESENT. By Eric A. Goldman. UMI Research Press, 1983. 224 pp. \$39.95.

Eric A. Goldman's marvelous *Visions, Images, and Dreams — Yiddish Film Past and Present* is a book abrim with surprises and discoveries:

Some of the very first short Yiddish films, made between 1911 and 1913, during the silent era, were "talkies." Experimenters in sound used primitive recording techniques to capture songs and snippets of dialogue. "Beser Den Toyt Eyder Aza Shand" (Better Death Than Such Shame), a 1914 Russian short with N.B. Leonov playing all five characters, was a full-fledged "talkie" throughout.

Isaac Babel, the great Russian-Jewish writer, was active in Soviet Yiddish cinema in the late 1920s. "Benye Krik" (Bennie the Howl) (1927), based on his own tales of the Odessa Jewish underworld, was the only original screenplay Babel ever

Pioneer Women/Na'amat thanks the following, who have contributed generously to the Women's Seminar Center by adding their names to the Peace Arch at the Beba Idelson Agricultural High School.

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wrote. No print of this film exists today, but the script is still available.

Joseph Seiden's 1930 opus "Mayne Yidishe Mame" (My Jewish Mother) was the first Yiddish talkie to be shown in Palestine. The Saturday night premier in Tel Aviv set off a riot. The protesters, who championed Hebrew, deemed Yiddish an objectionable Diaspora tongue. The British police had to be called out. "A Yiddish picture," Eric Goldman writes, "was not to be shown again in Palestine or Israel, in its original language, until the sixties."

Sidney M. Goldin, known as the Grandfather of Yiddish Cinema, began his career directing gangster films.

Edgar G. Ulmer, who co-directed the classic "Grine Felder" (Green Fields) (1937), is best known for his Hollywood movie "The Black Cat" (1934), a horror film starring Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi.

The first and so far only Yiddish film produced in Israel was "Az Men Git Nemt Men" (When They Give, Take). It was made in 1983, 33 years after the Yiddish film industry closed shop.

The most commercially successful Yiddish musical film of all time was Joseph Green's "Yidl mitn Fidl" (Yidl with a Fiddle) (1936). It cost \$50,000 to make — a gigantic sum for a Yiddish picture — and starred Molly Picon,

who to this day is still an active performer.

The most expensive Yiddish movie never made was Jules Dassin's production of Andre Schwartz-Bart's best seller, *Last of the Just*. Director Dassin bought the film rights in 1964 and announced that he planned to make the film in Yiddish. United Artists, after initial objections, was said to acquiesce. But then the project vanished.

The Yiddish cinema was, by and large, produced on a shoe string. Many of its efforts were marred by faulty photography and editing. And the majority of Yiddish films were melodramatic tear jerkers and soap operas. But the Yiddish cinema offers more than a mere record of a bygone era. Such films as "Grine Felder," "Der Dibuk" and "Yidl mitn Fidl" are true gems. And many lesser films have moments of shining beauty.

Eric Goldman has explored them all in this, the first comprehensive study of Yiddish movies. There are photographs galore and a first-rate filmography, listing all the Yiddish films from 1911 to the present. Mr. Goldman has made an invaluable contribution to Yiddish and film scholarship, and in the process produced a doozy of a book.

— Isidore Haiblum