

THE MERMAID AND THE MESSERSCHMITT:
War Through a Woman's Eyes, 1939-1940
by Rulka Langer
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Review by
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City Librarian, Los Angeles Public Library, 2004-2008

September 1, 1939 is an infamous day in 20th Century history, the start of World War II. But how many of us today know what happened when Nazi Germany invaded Poland, unleashing its military furor for the first time?

Seventy years later, a new edition of *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt*, a personal narrative by a young mother and journalist who lived through the Nazi bombardment and invasion of Warsaw with her two small children, does what no other book has done.

The title did not resonate with me in any way, and I didn't know what to expect. But Rulka Langer's story is utterly contemporary and compelling, and once I started the book, I could not put it down until I finished it.

Born in Warsaw to a distinguished and wealthy family, Rulka knew and loved every inch of her native city. In 1939, Rulka and her three-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son were living with her mother in a six-room Warsaw apartment, while her husband was posted by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Trade Commissioner in Philadelphia. Rulka had a degree from Vassar College, previously worked for the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency, and was working for the Bank of Poland in the summer of 1939.

That summer, everything in Europe revolved around talk of war. Rulka read Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, and with a heavy heart pondered the fate of Poland caught between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Would it be gone with the wind?

But nothing could prepare her or anyone who lived through the blitzkrieg and the war that followed. The destruction was shockingly fast and Rulka describes it day by day, each day that seems like weeks –the bombs, the bomb shelters, the fires, the scarcity of food, horse carcasses in the street stripped to the bone by hungry people, so many deaths that people were buried in empty lots all over the city, refugees from border towns coming to Warsaw, Varsovians escaping the city for points further east, the evacuation of the leaders and of the Bank of Poland, the personal horrors of women and children trying to survive.

Rulka published her book in 1942, after arriving in the United States, before the U.S. entered the war, before anyone knew how long the war would last and how it would be

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resolved, and before the horrors of the concentration camps and the Nazi genocide of Jews, gypsies and others would be revealed.

Able to get a U.S. visa because of her husband's position, she and her children escape the Nazi occupation in February 1940 by train, from Warsaw to Cracow to Vienna to Genoa for a boat to the U.S. The train is filled with German soldiers.

In a surreal moment at the end of the book, a soldier who is on leave and going skiing in Italy, befriends Rulka. Rulka tells him that she will be coming back to Poland as soon as it is free. He replies, well, Poland will be free of Jews. When she says that she doesn't care about that because she likes the Jews, he retorts that no one likes the Jews.

And then, bravely, Rulka asks him about the many German military uniforms, brown, gray, black, green, and wonders which is the Gestapo uniform because whenever people were beaten in Warsaw, everyone said, it's the Gestapo. The young soldier laughed. You want to know what the Gestapo uniform looks like; then look here and he pointed to the SD on his sleeve. This is the Gestapo uniform.

In Rulka's compelling story, we walk in her footsteps and the past is present.