

Counting My Steps

An Autobiography.

By Jakob Lind.

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By RICHARD M. ELMAN

"On the handle of Balzac's walking stick," wrote Kafka, in an obscurely aphoristic mood, "I shatter all obstacles. On that of my own, all obstacles shatter me."

Quite the opposite was the case with Jakob Lind, as "Counting My Steps," his autobiography, tellingly reveals, though Lind was born into pretty nearly the same lower-middle-class, *echt Deutsch* Jewish culture, and at a far worse moment in history than Kafka. It was the era of the so-called Thousand Year Reich through which he managed to survive for 12 years. To do so (and immigrate finally to Palestine at war's end) Lind had to come to hate passive victimized Jews like a German, and hate his German victimizers like a Jew. He donned a variety of disguises: a young Zionist, a Dutch laborer, a farmworker, a sailor boy with quisling leanings, an anti-Semite, a Palestinian D.P. In short, Lind—as the saying goes—really freaked out.

His original identity as a Viennese Jew from an impoverished but respectable family with certain smug pretensions to betterness was so entirely hateful to him that it was relatively easy for him to turn schizoid in the face of that past and what the present and future held out. Lind changed identities, became a survival expert. Still only in his early adolescence at the time of Anschluss, he came of age away from home and family, a schizoid Nietzschean, but also a Socialist, who ended the war in the very heartland of battered Germany as the confidential factotum of sorts to a fairly high-ranking Nazi metallurgist. Lind had watched the others being gathered up in Vienna, Amsterdam, the Hague, Rotterdam, and he decided he did not want to go along with them. He donned the Nazi youth emblem and, fortunately, survived to tell the tale.

Lind's story of his daily struggle to live as one thing or another, always convinced of his right to survive at such a desperate time, is ironic, exact in its portraits of wartime venality, apathy, ignorance and greed, and also extremely funny with a laugh that is often like a sobbing in the chest. His recall is often impressionistic or even surreal, but just as often

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Schoolboy

Sailor boy

specific, precise, detailed and devastatingly political with the proportions exactly fitted to the mind of its adolescent *raisonneur*. His aim is to show, in part, that one grows in the midst of a rubble pile so long as one is careful to dodge the various crushing footsteps of one's enemies; but in the process, enemies and friends are given a thorough going-over.

In a phrase he summons up his ne'er-do-well salesman father and his band of cafe-sitting acquaintances as "hippies in galoshes." He unleashes

try to "feel God" is poked his first attempts at masturbation, for two packs of Wings cigarettes in a Dutch foster home. It is characteristic of Lind's demonic demythologizing, I think, that in one lengthy passage Nazi racial epithets for Jews are intermixed in comic staccato with Jewish lower-middle-class social epithets for just about everybody else. In short, in less than 100 pages, prewar Vienna is summoned up with a clear ironic wit and a vivid—though occasionally wooden and stilted—prose, which only helps to make all the more clear that what was human was not necessarily glamorous and what was historic was always inhuman.

Lind does almost as well with his adventures as an immigrant with forged papers in wartime Holland, where he was sent by a Zionist refugee group to escape Anschluss, and where he later managed to evade the Nazi roundups of June, 1943, though his narrative becomes somewhat abrupt and cursory when the war ends and he is forced, for lack of anything better to do, to immigrate to Palestine. Part of the problem is, I think, that Lind — for all the terror of it—found his forays in the land of his enemies to be a great adventure whereas going, among the dispossessed Jews, to Palestine, a new homeland, was rather like being sent back to Vienna again, only with sand and palm trees added.

In Holland and Germany he had come to know women, strong drink and Nietzsche. He narrowly escaped being bombed. He learned to contain his loneliness and to satisfy his needs. Like Huck Finn before him, many of Lind's most crucial experiences in coming of age transpired on a river, in this case the Rhine—surely an equal of the Mississippi in mythological possibilities—and among disreputable characters whom his proper Viennese family would have never tolerated. He had a job, a monthly salary, reasonably adequate food, watched Nazi movies, sat in cafes and wondered to himself all the while if he was who he thought he was, and if so why didn't anybody else know. It was the best of times for Lind. At least, he had never really known any that were better.

The whole tale makes moving reading that is excruciatingly swift and alum bitter. This is not simply a series of war anecdotes that Lind is seeking to relate. To make the horror of the Final Solution credible, he banalizes daily existence amid that horror, shows how he had to reduce himself, at times, to that horror so that he might survive it. "I think wrecked baby prams with wheels," he exclaims early on; and later when the war is over, lets fall with the accuracy of a guillotine blade: "They didn't hang them and they didn't shoot them, they wouldn't have known whom to start with."

Lind is the (Continued on Page 54)

Farmworker



Palestinian D.P.



as one brilliant set piece the comic monologue of his first teacher Hartle on the uses and abuses of the pocket hanky, and then deftly counterpoints this with the fiendish daily catechisms he had to undergo from his intellectually precocious Jewish playmates in Vienna about the various works of Tolstoy, Werfel, Mann, etc.

His professors at *gymnasium*, who "talked me out of my daydreams" are remembered by name, face and crotchet. Against his mother's shame-faced gluey platitudes that he must

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author of "Soul of Wood," "Landscape in Concrete," "Ergo" and other works, including some plays, and in nearly all his short fiction, including this so-called autobiography, there is a figure who constantly emerges: He is sometimes German and sometimes anonymously European or even Jewish. Male or female, he or she can be fat or skinny, moving up the social ladder to some unspecified goal, or having hopelessly fallen off to grumble bitterly. Always this figure is irrational, callous and cruel. Indifferent because so crazy and crazy to be so indifferent, or for being so.

He is Man himself, the beast inside that suet suit of skin and hair and bones and blood and nervous tics and wind. The Humanist ideal reduced to mere humanity, to his fists and his anus, his mouth and his anger. No matter how high up he is thought to be, he will always feel cheated; no matter how humble, persecuted. He is the "fear" that "roots in self-humiliation" to which Lind refers in his preface, autobiographically.

From out of the ash heaps that are being refurbished in Europe, Asia, here, the Middle East, during, after the war and even now, he leers at us, proof that not only the six million were destroyed, but that the holocaust is ongoing, that apocalypse is now and that that which can no longer be pretended is that which even anti-Semites once claimed to uphold—the concept of Man's essential difference from the other beasts. This was destroyed not only in the abstract, but in the young person of Lind himself who, as he reveals in this most eloquent piece of autobiographical writing, had to reduce himself to a ferret to live among his fellow ferrets who were all, it seems, good Germans. ■
