

Book Review: *Berlin Diaries-A Lesson for Us All*

***Berlin Diaries, 1940-1945.* Marie Vassiltchikov. 1988. New York. Random House.**

*Reviewed by Carin Paris*¹

No doubt the horrors that went on in Germany during World War II with the Jews were real and we never want to see them repeated. I once heard that if we do not know the past we are doomed to repeat it. For that reason believe it is important to read such books as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Schindler's List*, and *The Hiding Place* which are all first-hand accounts of the atrocities with which we associate World War II. However, what went on in the daily life of World War II Germany? *Berlin Diaries* tells us just that.

Berlin Diaries is a detailed account of the life a young Russian aristocrat living in Berlin during World War II. (After the Bolshevik Revolution Marie and her family lived as refugees in Germany, France, and Lithuania. Her father was a Russian Prince). In her *Diaries* Marie (Missie) Vassiltchikov simply records her daily actions during a time of turmoil for the whole world. She tells of the troubles of getting a job in Germany as a foreigner. She vividly describes the aristocratic parties she attends right up until the time of the heavy Allied bombings (1944). For Missie Vassiltchikov social life did not slow down until right before the end of the war. She describes the luxurious vacations she and her family and friends took. Truly, life in Germany during the war was not what we were taught to believe.

Missie Vassiltchikov's life was not without hardship during the war. First of all, she is separated from her family. Part of her immediate family is in France; others are in Italy, while still others are in a different part of Germany. Many times throughout her diary she describes the worry she feels for her family. Secondly, food became scarcer as the war progressed. She talks about standing in line for long hours just to find out the store would not ac-

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cept her ration coupons. Other hardships included deaths of friends and loss of earthly possessions.

Her diary, while describing the continuing social life, at the same time accurately records the hardships of war which can be described in one word: extraordinary. Through Missie's work, one can see the normalcy and struggles of daily life in wartime Germany in a way that traditional histories of the war never communicate.

An extra plus of this book for me—as an English teacher—was that it was originally written in English. Missie was born in Russia. Russian was her first language. No explanation is given why she wrote her personal diary in English, but it does not matter to me. What is important is that she did it. As EFL teachers, we can now encourage our advanced students to write in English. And now we have an example. No more excuses! If Missie did it during World War II in Germany, our students can do it today here in Mexico.

Simple, but elegant, is the way to describe her writing style. It is so simply written that even beginning-intermediate students can understand with the guidance of a teacher. It is not so easy and simple, however, that advanced readers lose interest.

This *is* a great book for two reasons. First of all, her daily accounts of life during World War II are invaluable from an historical perspective. Secondly, we as EFL teachers can use this book as an in-class-reading tool to launch our students into a new realm of English writing.