

Oy Mame! Oy Mame! I Looked into the Eyes of Evil

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Oy Mame! Oy Mame! is an inspiring Holocaust survival story.

Oy Mame! Oy Mame! is the eyewitness account of Abraham Gutreiman, a Polish Jew, who, along with his elder brother Yankel, survived the Holocaust.

Although his brother avoided talking about the many horrors inflicted upon them, including the losses of their family members, Abraham shared his stories with his children, Max Gutreiman Goldberg and Chana Gutreiman Goldberg, who decided to record them for their descendants. While the project was conceived of as a family history, Abraham's story is historically significant and worth preserving for posterity. With the aid of writer and scholar Mauricio Vargas Ortega, Abraham's recorded reminiscences have been edited and arranged into a compelling narrative, originally written in Spanish and translated by Ariella Garren, a thirteen-year-old Jewish girl in Costa Rica. The result of these combined efforts is a remarkable volume.

Abraham begins with a brief history of his parents and their union in the Polish town of Parysow. Abraham was one of six children. When he was ten years old, his father was murdered by an acquaintance, leaving his thirty-year-old mother a widow. On that same day, his baby brother died. Abraham was forced to begin working to help support his family, selling grain in Warsaw, which was 50 kilometers from his home.

As Abraham notes, Jews had been living in Poland for over one thousand years. However, he and his family gradually became aware of the animosity some of their gentile neighbors had toward them. In 1939, their village was occupied by Germans. Abraham notes that Polish collaborators were rewarded with a kilogram of sugar for turning in Jews. Abraham and his family were rounded up and put on a train bound for Treblinka. By chance, Yankel and Abraham were near a window. Some escaped from the train by pushing one another out the window, even though it was only 30 square centimeters wide. Yankel and his brother survived being thrown from the train and spent the next several months fleeing, hiding from the Germans. The rest of their family members perished.

Eventually, Abraham and his brother managed to escape to Bolivia, where they sold Angora coats, shoes, and shirts, among other items. Passages about their life in La Paz, and, later, in Costa Rica, provide insight into the Jewish communities of South and Central America, where business was conducted in both Yiddish and Spanish. In spite of occasional hardships in their new homelands, including an attempted robbery by machete-wielding intruders, Abraham remained appreciative of those who helped him.

Although Abraham often mentions his crisis of faith, he also refers to his desire to live and the invincibility of the human spirit. Scenes of horror are interspersed with passages written in verse, which allow space for reflection and serve as reminders of the beauty of the world.

The final section of the book comes in the form of a letter written to Abraham's ninety-eight-year-old brother, Yankel, who declines to accompany him and his children on a visit to Poland. Abraham is unable to find the graves of his family members, but he performs Kaddish and reunites with the descendants of some of those who helped him and his brother to survive.

Abraham shares his enduring trauma and its manifestations with unflinching honesty. For example, he recounts being so agitated during his visit to Warsaw that he fell out of bed at night and injured his head. Yet, he never attempts to deny or suppress what happened.

Oy Mame! Oy Mame! is a valuable record from the Holocaust—the inspiring story of two brothers' survival.

SUZANNE KAMATA (June 21, 2022)

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