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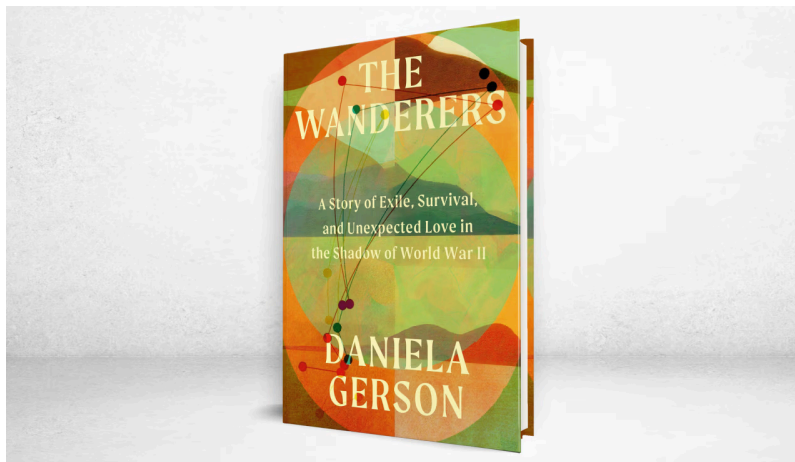
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'The Wanderers' Review: This Side of Survival

Less fearful of the uncertainties ahead under Stalin than the guaranteed persecution under Hitler, many Polish Jews chose to head east.

By Diane Cole

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A demonic choice loomed over the Jews who were trapped in their hometown of Zamość, Poland, at the start of World War II: take their chances for survival by escaping east into Soviet-occupied territory, or stay in place and leave their fate to the Nazis.

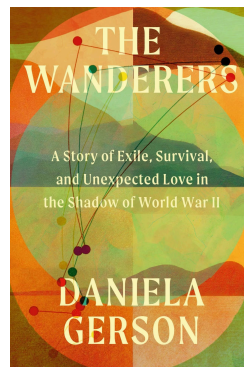
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The Wanderers: A Story of Exile, Survival, and Unexpected Love in the Shadow of World War II

This somber gamble was the consequence of the two-pronged invasion of Poland, in September 1939, by Germany from the west and the Soviet Union from the east. After the country was conquered

By Daniela Gerson

Grand Central



and the territory carved up by the Nazis and the Soviets, Zamość—whose Jewish community amounted to more than 40% of the town’s population—was at first ceded to the Soviet Union, then a week later relinquished to

Germany.

During this brief window, approximately two-thirds of the Jews of Zamość decided to flee the approaching Nazis and accompany the Soviet troops returning to Russia. Less fearful of the uncertainties that lay ahead under Stalin than the certainty of persecution under Hitler, the threatened community could not have predicted the suffering that awaited them in the labor camps and isolated settlements where they would be sent. Then again, few could have imagined the horrors of the Nazi death camps they only learned about upon returning, after the war, to what was left of their home.

In retrospect, crossing to the “other side,” as it was called, had turned out to be the lucky—or, at least, less unlucky—choice for the approximately 300,000 Polish Jews who had headed east. It was a harrowing route that nevertheless afforded a significantly higher (though still grimly uncertain) chance of survival than Nazi-held territory. And yet, as Daniela Gerson observes in “The Wanderers,” the survival stories of the Jewish refugees under Stalin remain largely unfamiliar.

This overlooked chapter piqued the interest of Ms. Gerson, an immigration reporter and professor of journalism at California State University, Northridge. Among those who took the harsh road east were her grandparents and ancestors, as well as those of Ms. Gerson’s wife, Talia Inlender, an immigration lawyer. The shared connection drew the couple together when they first met. They even pledged, before they wed, that they

would one day trace their forebears' journeys together. Ten years later, married and with their twin son and daughter in tow, they set out on their quest.

Typical family vacation fare it was not. But the couple derived their sense of purpose from the arduous journeys embarked upon by their relatives, as well as from the stories of the modern immigrants with whom the two women worked professionally. "We wanted our children to one day understand," Ms. Gerson writes, "what it took for Talia and me to come together in this world."

Before they even departed, Ms. Gerson's research uncovered a jolting secret: Although Ms. Inlender's grandfather Leon had fled Zamość in 1939, his first wife and their 5-year-old son—a prior family Ms. Inlender never knew existed—stayed behind. This family did not survive, but a photo Ms. Gerson found revealed a spirited little boy who looked almost exactly like Ms. Inlender's father. "This was Talia's uncle, Kolonimus, whose name" her father, "his half-brother, had never known." Perhaps, Ms. Gerson wondered, this unspeakable loss lay behind Leon's silence about the details of his own survival.

Upon arriving in Zamość with her wife and children, Ms. Gerson's first impressions are mixed, as the charm of the city's exquisitely preserved Renaissance buildings and tourist-friendly streets clash with the discomfiting thoughts of her ancestors being brutally cast out. A stroll around town soon reveals that the houses in which Ms. Gerson's and Ms. Inlender's grandparents lived were no more than 100 steps apart. Surely, the author wonders, their proximity meant that the two families knew each other, if only in passing. The sight of numerous vehicles with Ukrainian license plates, however, quickly pulls Ms. Gerson's thoughts back to the present, reminding her that the city's proximity to the Ukrainian border has

made Zamość a central refuge and transit hub for those fleeing the conflict-ridden region.

Zamość is only a prelude, though, to further travels over the next four years, by Ms. Gerson alone into Ukraine, or with Ms. Inlander and their children to far-flung locales across the Siberian Arctic and central Asia. Chapter by chapter, the author intertwines the sagas of both sets of grandparents. She alternates among the cherished oral histories recorded by deceased relatives, the poignant encounters with surviving family members in Israel, and the unexpectedly revealing interviews Ms. Gerson conducts with elderly strangers still living in the Siberian settlements through which the Jewish refugees passed in the 1940s.

Ms. Gerson takes her book's title from the biblical story of the Exodus—"my father was a wandering Aramean"—to remind us of the itinerant past all humans share. She recounts how her father, Allan Gerson, and his parents fled a displaced-person camp in Germany, arriving in America in 1950 using the identities and visas they had bought from another refugee family, the Blumsteins. Meanwhile, the actual Blumstein family, Ms. Gerson learns, made their way to Melbourne, Australia. She eventually tracks down other Blumstein relations who had landed in Israel, finding them living in the same town as Ms. Gerson's brother-in-law.

When Ms. Gerson finally meets these descendants on a trip to Israel, she writes that, though strangers, they bond instantly, as if at a reunion. They are all wanderers, after all, whose luck and persistence had brought them there. Their connection to each other—and to the plight of migrants today—is palpable throughout this powerful book.

—*Ms. Cole is the author of the memoir "After Great Pain: A New Life Emerges."*

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