



Return to Dresden

Maria Ritter

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Why did the German people tolerate the Nazi madness? Maria Ritter's life is haunted by the ever-painful, never-answerable "German Question." Who knew? What was known?

Confronting the profound silence in which most postwar Germans buried pain and shame, she attempts in this memoir to give an answer for herself and for her generation. Sixty years after the defeat of Nazi Germany, she reflects on the nation's oppressive burden and the persecution of the contemporary consciousness.

"'We received what we deserved,' my grandfather said after the war, and I believed him. His stare out the window spoke of bitterness and solemn resignation in the face of God's punishment and pity for us all."

In probing the dark shadows of wartime, she reconstructs the voice of her childhood. With a determined search for remnants of her past during a visit to her homeland, Ritter retrieves memories and emotions from places, personal stories, and letters. As she interweaves them with events in her family's struggle to survive the war and its aftermath, she creates a tragic tapestry.

She recalls the weary odyssey from Poland to Leipzig with refugees in 1943 and remembers being sheltered there beside her grandfather. She returns to Dresden to rekindle memories of the firebombing in 1945. She revisits the remote Saxony countryside where she and her mother crossed the border from East to West Germany in flight from the Communists in 1949. She relives the pain of learning that her father "will never return from the war." On a Memorial Day many years later, Ritter's longstanding, unresolved grief overflows as she writes a posthumous letter to him. She suffers in the heartbreaking memory of her valiant mother, who overcame loss and grief along the road to freedom and a new home.

Ritter's memoir sweeps through German history of the 1930s and '40s as she meditates on how she and her people figure in the tragic story of defeat and debacle. In her recollections, in listening to the voices of her kin, and in speaking out about the past, she finds the humane way to healing and reconciliation.

Maria Ritter is a clinical psychologist in San Diego, California.

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