

Books, brutality in czarist Russia

"Horodno Burning"

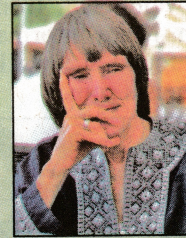
Nov 4, 2021

Michael Freed-Thall, Rootstock Publishing, 2021.

"Horodno Burning" chronicles the fictional lives of Esther Lev-ing and Bernard Garfinkle, from their separate childhoods in 1860s Horodno (the Yiddish name for Grodno, in present-day Belarus), through their marriage and the birth of their twins in the 1870s, to the pogrom of 1882 and the family's flight to America in 1885. Esther (Estes, throughout the book) is an intellectual who can read in five languages by the time she is 15, a woman infuriated by the inferior position of women in Russian and Jewish culture, and increasingly, a writer. Bernard, the son of a vodka distiller, is deeply religious—and unable to read. As Estes puts it, "Single words aren't the problem, but when they gather, all talking at once, he lurches forward, pauses, sounds out, only to lose his way and backtrack. It exhausts him." Patiently, she helps him improve his reading—thus offering him a place in a culture that is devoted to literature and learning.

Among other things, the book is a tribute to a loving marriage between two people who work out ways to tolerate each other's con-flicting ideas: Estes, an atheist and free-thinker, tolerates Bernard's Judaism; Bernard, sympathizing with Estes's dis-like of a religion that separates men and women in worship and systematically educates only boys, quietly worships at home. He also builds Estes a bookshop that becomes the intellectual center of Horodno. Into this center, Freed-Thall draws two women from the history of the period: the Polish writer Eliza Orzeszkowa, well-known among 19th-century Jews for her hatred of anti-semitism; and the revolutionary Gesia Gelfman, who was involved in the 1881 assassination of Czar Alexander II. Skillfully incorporated into the novel, these women inspire Estes' writing. They also worry Bernard, and with reason, for Estes' relationships with the two attract the attention of Russian officials, who become increasingly suspicious of Estes' published writing and private correspondences after the accession of the rabidly antisemitic Alexander III.

The characters and events in "Horodno Burning," together with its portrayal of a people whose love of learning nourishes their determination to survive in increasingly dangerous times, give it more the flavor of an epic than a novel. Its compassion and lack of melodrama are superb. Its triumph, however, is its detailed portrayal of life in the late-19th century Pale of Settlement. The Pale covered the western part of the Russian Empire to which, between 1791 and 1917, the czars gradually banished 94% of their Jewish subjects. Touching the Baltic Sea in the north and stretching to the Black Sea in the south, the Pale covered modern-day Lithuania, Belarus, Mol-dova, Ukraine, large portions of Poland, and small parts of Latvia and Russia. At the time of "Horodno Burning," it contained close to 4,900,000 Jews: 40% of the Jewish population of the world. What Freed-Thall catches so magnificently is daily life in the cross-cultural cities of the Pale. Estes' father, a shoemaker, speaks Yiddish, Polish, and Russian. Bernard hires a Polish friend when he takes over his father's distillery; his Jewish friends initially object, but eventually they become comrades. Walks through the markets, streets, and train stations—along with a cart ride through the shtetls that dot the land-scape—portray warmth of spirit as well as a cold, dark, and muddy landscape. This is a wonderful, compelling book. Read it.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson