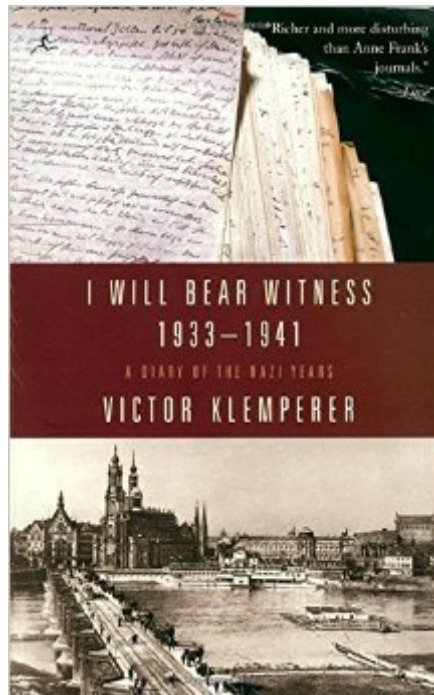


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I Will Bear Witness: A Diary Of The Nazi Years, 1933-1941



Synopsis

The publication of Victor Klemperer's secret diaries brings to light one of the most extraordinary documents of the Nazi period. "In its cool, lucid style and power of observation," said The New York Times, "it is the best-written, most evocative, most observant record of daily life in the Third Reich." *I Will Bear Witness* is a work of literature as well as a revelation of the day-by-day horror of the Nazi years. A Dresden Jew, a veteran of World War I, a man of letters and historian of great sophistication, Klemperer recognized the danger of Hitler as early as 1933. His diaries, written in secrecy, provide a vivid account of everyday life in Hitler's Germany. What makes this book so remarkable, aside from its literary distinction, is Klemperer's preoccupation with the thoughts and actions of ordinary Germans: Berger the greengrocer, who was given Klemperer's house ("anti-Hitlerist, but of course pleased at the good exchange"), the fishmonger, the baker, the much-visited dentist. All offer their thoughts and theories on the progress of the war: Will England hold out? Who listens to Goebbels? How much longer will it last? This symphony of voices is ordered by the brilliant, grumbling Klemperer, struggling to complete his work on eighteenth-century France while documenting the ever-tightening Nazi grip. He loses first his professorship and then his car, his phone, his house, even his typewriter, and is forced to move into a Jews' House (the last step before the camps), put his cat to death (Jews may not own pets), and suffer countless other indignities. Despite the danger his diaries would pose if discovered, Klemperer sees it as his duty to record events. "I continue to write," he notes in 1941 after a terrifying run-in with the police. "This is my heroics. I want to bear witness, precise witness, until the very end." When a neighbor remarks that, in his isolation, Klemperer will not be able to cover the main events of the war, he writes: "It's not the big things that are important, but the everyday life of tyranny, which may be forgotten. A thousand mosquito bites are worse than a blow on the head. I observe, I note, the mosquito bites." This book covers the years from 1933 to 1941. Volume Two, from 1941 to 1945, will be published in 1999.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

My review refers to the german original edition of the Klemperer diaries from 1933-1945. In the german edition, the diaries are not published in two parts. It must be hard for the english reader to stop 1941 and wait. Klemperer wrote more than 5000 typescript pages of diary during the nazi period. The german original edition with many cutbacks has more than 1800 pages (1933-1945), the english translation about 500 (1933-1941), so I expect more cutbacks in the english version - most likely around Klemperers language studies about LTI-lingua tertii imperii, the language of the 3. Reich - more interesting for german native speakers. For the english reader, which had yet only read the diary until 1941 I will give the warning, that the 1942 diary is really the most depressing one. The Klemperer diary is definitely the best book I ever read about the nazi-time. (second one: Hans Fallada, 1947: "Jeder stirbt f r sich allein" (Everybody dies for himself), English title: ?) As a German I grew up with an endless amount of information, literature, books, documentations, discussions and history school lessons about the 3. Reich, but the most refer only to long known facts and their problem is, that they are written with the look of the survivors, the next generation or the history view which sorts and interprets the facts with the knowledge of the ending. I believe, that nobody can understand the system, who has not read "first-hand" impressions. The Klemperer diary is, what I always was looking for: An uncommented inside view to the all day life in germany in that days and the evolution of the unthinkable. A first-hand information about the terrorism not in the concentration camps, but in "normal" life.

The most disarming and appealing feature of this tome is its slow and ineluctable building of suspense and empathy as World War I veteran Klemperer steadily weaves the day to day details of his life in 1930s Germany into a portrait of a rogue state moving irresistably down the path to tyranny and terror. The reader is sucked into the vortex of what it is like to live under such

circumstances, where an aging Jewish professor who has built a life of purpose and meaning based on scholarship, hard work, and the belief in the rationalism of the state begins to understand that it will all unravel around him. You begin to experience how difficult and incomprehensible it must be for him, and empathize and worry for his fate as the building storm clouds of violent fascism fill the skies of 1930s Germany. As the days and weeks pass into months and years under the growing tyranny of National Socialism, Klemperer, married to an Aryan woman, increasingly finds solace and relief from the growing insanity swirling around him by concentrating on his academic writing, which he continues against all odds. As he faces an arbitrary enforced early retirement from his professorial duties, he also begins to take more time to enjoy simple pleasures with his wife, Eva, as they revel in long nature walks, the perils and pleasures of driving a second-hand car, and in watching the cinema. His refusal to submit to the progressively more invective growth of lies, invectives, and accusations of the Nazi regime build into a quiet resolve to resist in the way he knows best, by maintaining an intelligent, insightful, and careful witness to the everyday horrors perpetrated with malice and cunning on the Jews as the scapegoat for all of Germany's post-WWI social and economic woes.

As an Irishman who lived in Germany for three years and really enjoyed getting my teeth into their rich and juicy language, I found the story of Viktor Klemperer's struggle to stay afloat in the 1930's as a Jew very familiar. There are many places in this world where people feel as he did, at least while the humiliations and restrictions were still not life-threatening, and that is why many would find such a diary interesting. Women in the Third Reich, too, could have written about being fired from respectable positions and sent back to "kirche, kuche und kindern". What makes the story very authentic are his very stereotypical views of women, or "little people" (workers, etc.), and his own gravitation towards fellow Jews. This makes him much more real - fussy, getting older, losing his courage and endurance, dealing with his wife Eva's illness, driven mad by doing "housemaid's work" which Eva, unemployed, cannot seem to do. The stove needs coal, and it's always dirty. They have a summer cottage in Doelschen, and they are trying to do the work themselves, getting there by expensive taxi, with Eva driven bonkers by the neighbors there around them so much further progressed in their cottage building. HE is perpetually strapped to pay his bills, has to give up his life insurance policy, but carries on with the extreme expense of running a used car, delighting in using the new 7.5-km autobahn near Dresden, a road for the Fuhrer! They do not give up the cottage or the car when he is suspended from the university. All the petty and not-so-petty sums which plague this older couple (toilet paper, for example, and cigarettes) are recounted in numerical detail. That is

what makes the story so interesting, and so real.

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