



Reverend Katz Library

New Book Reviews

June 2024

Michael Haas, *Music of Exile: the untold story of the composers who fled Hitler* MUS HAA

What happens to a composer when persecution and exile means their true music no longer has an audience?

In the 1930s, composers and musicians began to flee Hitler's Germany to make new lives across the globe. The process of exile was complex: although some of their works were celebrated, these composers had lost their familiar cultures and were forced to navigate xenophobia as well as entirely different creative terrain. Others, far less fortunate, were in a kind of internal exile, composing under a ruthless dictatorship or in concentration camps and ghettos.

Michael Haas sensitively records the experiences of this musical diaspora. Torn between cultures and traditions, these composers produced music that synthesized old and new worlds, some becoming core portions of today's repertoire, some relegated to the desk drawer. Encompassing the musicians interned as enemy aliens in the United Kingdom, the brilliant Hollywood compositions of Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and the Brecht-inspired theatre music of Kurt Weill, Haas shows how these musicians shaped the twentieth-century soundscape—and offers a moving record of the incalculable effects of war on culture.

Penny Olson, *Artful lives: The artful lives of the Cohen Sisters* BIO COH

The Cohen sisters lived frugally, enjoyed mischief and flaunted their bohemian lifestyle. Raised in the Melbourne suburb of Elwood and then drawn to the tropics, their winters were spent painting, fishing and gardening on their tropical island in Far North Queensland—then an undeveloped part of Australia. Far from the gaze of civilisation, life was simple and bronzed. Artistic men were a temptation. They mixed with prominent artists, writers, designers and academics longing for a more progressive, independent Australia. Lina Bryans, Jock Frater, Arthur Boyd, Clif Pugh, Noel Wood, Roy Dalgarno, Roger Kemp, Ian Fairweather, Clem Christesen, Alan Marshall and Alistair Knox were among their friends and associates. The sisters' lives spanned the twentieth century, two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the making of modern Australia. Beginning as wealthy, young Melbourne socialites, they gradually shed their skin to become bohemians, painting and writing—more than anything, enjoying the milieu. Part family history, part social history, part art history, as the sisters' extraordinary story unfolds, so too does an art heist.

Corjan Mol and Christopher Morford, *The Jerusalem Files: the secret journey of the Menorah to Oak Island* HIS MOL

A non-fiction Da Vinci Code for the 21st century, this thrilling treasure hunt traces the voyage of the legendary Jewish Menorah from the Jerusalem of the Knights Templar through France, Portugal and North America, providing mind-blowing history and mystery for fans of *The Curse of Oak Island*.

The Jewish Menorah is one of the world's most sacred artifacts, a man-size lampstand with seven arms, made from a single block of gold, that is an iconic symbol for the Jewish people. King Solomon placed it in the inner sanctum of the Temple of Jerusalem, but by the 5th century AD, all trace of it had disappeared from the official record, and it was assumed lost. Two historical researchers, Corjan Mol and Christopher Morford now reveal the astounding secret of what happened to the Menorah. Through their meticulous research as well as a jaw-dropping stroke of luck, Mol and Morford discovered that the Menorah was dug up from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in the time of the Crusades by the Knights Templar and smuggled to France with the help of the French King Louis IX. From there it was taken to Portugal, to end up in North America after interventions by Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington. The secret was hidden in plain sight in both France and North America, on a scale so big that it took 800 years for it to be discovered.

Noah Feldman, *To be a Jew today: New guide to God, Israel and the Jewish people* JUD FEL

A leading public intellectual's timely reckoning with how Jews can and should make sense of their tradition and each other. What does it mean to be a Jew? At a time of worldwide crisis, vulnerable answers to this question have become unsettled. In *To Be a Jew Today*, the legal scholar and columnist Noah Feldman draws on a lifelong engagement with his religion to offer a wide-ranging interpretation of Judaism in its current varieties. How do Jews today understand their relationship to God, to Israel, and to each other. What does it mean to be a Jew? At a time of worldwide crisis, venerable answers to this question other—and live their lives accordingly?

Writing sympathetically but incisively about diverse outlooks, Feldman clarifies what's at stake in the choice of *how* to be a Jew, and discusses the shared "theology of struggle" that Jews engage in as they wrestle with who God is, what God wants, or whether God exists. He shows how the founding of *Israel has transformed Judaism itself over the last century—and explores the ongoing consequences of that transformation for all Jews, who find the meaning of their Jewishness and their views about Israel intertwined, no matter what those views are. And he examines the analogies between being Jewish and belonging to a large, messy family—a family that often makes its members crazy, but a family all the same. Written with learning, empathy and clarity, To Be a Jew Today is a critical resource for readers of all faiths*

Abigail Pogrebin, *Stars of David: Prominent Jews talk about being Jewish* JUD POG

Why is this book different from all others? Because it features sixty-one American cultural icons talking about their personal faith: Judaism. Sixty-two of the most accomplished Jews in America speak intimately—most for the first time—about how they feel about being Jewish. In unusually candid interviews conducted by former 60 Minutes producer Abigail Pogrebin, celebrities ranging from Sarah Jessica Parker to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, from Larry King to Mike Nichols, reveal how resonant, crucial or incidental being Jewish is in their lives. The connections they have to their Jewish heritage range from hours in synagogue to bagels and lox; but every person speaks to the weight and pride of their Jewish history, the burdens and pleasures of observance, the moments they've felt most Jewish. This book of vivid, personal conversations uncovers how being Jewish fits into a public life, and how the author's evolving religious identity was changed by what she heard.

Elizabeth Graver, *Katinka* F GRA

A dazzling Sephardic multigenerational saga that moves from Istanbul to Barcelona, Havana, and New York, exploring displacement, endurance, and family as home.

A kaleidoscopic portrait of one family's displacement across four countries, *Katinka* "song" in

Ladino—follows the joys and losses of Rebecca Cohen, feisty daughter of the Sephardic elite of early 20th-century Istanbul. When the Cohens lose their wealth and are forced to move to Barcelona and start anew, Rebecca fashions a life and self from what comes her way, a failed marriage, the need to earn a living, but also passion, pleasure and motherhood. Moving from Spain to Cuba to New York for an arranged second marriage, she faces her greatest challenge, her disabled stepdaughter, Luna, whose feistiness equals her own and whose challenges pit new family against old. Exploring identity, place and exile, *Kantika* also reveals how the female body—in work, art and love, serves as a site of both suffering and joy. A haunting, inspiring meditation on the tenacity of women this lush, lyrical novel from Elizabeth Graver celebrates the insistence on seizing beauty and grabbing hold of one's one and only life.

Elizabeth B White and Joanna Sliwo, *The counterfeit countess: the untold story of the Jewish heroine who defied the Holocaust* HOL WHI

The previously untold story of the incredible Janina (Pepi Spinner) Mehlberg, a young Polish-Jewish mathematician who saved the lives of many inmates of the Majdanek concentration and extermination camp at Lublin in Poland during the Second World War - which she did by posing as a bogus Polish aristocrat named Countess Janina Suchodolska.

The Holocaust has given rise to many accounts of resistance and rescue, but *The Counterfeit Countess* is unique. It tells the remarkable, untold story of 'Countess Janina Suchodolska', a Jewish woman named Janina Mehlberg who rescued more than 10,000 Poles imprisoned by their country's Nazi occupiers.

Janina Mehlberg operated in Lublin, headquarters of Aktion Reinhard, the SS operation that murdered 1.7 million Jews in occupied Poland. Using the identity papers of a Polish aristocrat, she worked as a welfare official while also serving in the Polish resistance. With guile, cajolery, and steely persistence, 'the Countess' persuaded SS officials to release thousands of Poles from the Majdanek concentration camp. She won permission to deliver food, clothing and medicine for thousands more of the camp's prisoners. At the same time, she personally smuggled supplies and messages to resistance fighters imprisoned at Majdanek, where 63,000 Jews were murdered in gas chambers and shooting pits. Incredibly, she eluded detection, survived the war and eventually emigrated to the USA.

Drawing on the manuscript of Mehlberg's own unpublished memoir, supplemented with prodigious research, Elizabeth White and Joanna Sliwa, professional historians and Holocaust experts, have uncovered the full story of this extraordinary woman. They interweave Mehlberg's sometimes harrowing personal testimony with broader historical narrative. Unsparing yet inspiring, *The Counterfeit Countess* is an unforgettable account of selfless courage in the face of unspeakable cruelty, and a major addition to the history of the Holocaust.