

I NEVER SAW MY FACE

By: Sam Goetz

Reviewed by Professor David N. Myers, UCLA History Department

Dr. Sam Goetz's memoir, *I Never Saw My Face*, is a compelling account of a Jew's passage from the abyss of terror to the light of freedom. Those who know Sam Goetz will recognize his keen eye for historical detail, as well as the passionate urge to give voice to those who no longer speak. Indeed, it is that urge that has made Sam Goetz one of the most indefatigable, respected, and informed advocates of Holocaust education in the United States.

Goetz commences the tale of his life journey in the pre-war ambience of Tarnow, Poland, home to a well-established Jewish community of some 25,000 residents with roots as far back as the fifteenth century. The comfortable family life of the Goetz family is abruptly shattered by the entry of German tanks into Tarnow in early September 1939. From that point on, Goetz's life descends into a world of increasing fear, brutality, and degradation—punctuated by the deportation, and subsequent murder, of his parents and friends. The young Goetz manages to dodge the Nazi death machine—ghetto liquidation and concentration camps—by a combination of sheer luck, instinct, and perseverance. He relates his daily brush with death in a meticulous prose devoid of sentiment or self-congratulation. And yet, there is psychological drama in this book. When Goetz and fellow katzetniks see the American tanks rolling toward the Ebensee concentration camp on May 6, 1945—or when Goetz sees his own emaciated face in a mirror for the first time in three years (from which the book's title is drawn), the reader is invited to share in an intensely emotional moment.

I Never Saw My Face does not end with liberation. It depicts Sam Goetz's time as a war refugee in Italy, where he met his love and life partner, Gerti. And it depicts his passage to the United States, where he reunited with Gerti and made a life together with her. Herein lies the elusive marvel of the survivor experience. If, as some have argued, the experience of the camps lies beyond the comprehension of those who were not there, it is almost as imponderable, for me at least, to grasp the survivor's experience after liberation—the astonishing assertion of will to continue on after escaping the nightmare of death. Goetz hints at the keys to success in the immediate wake of liberation—simply satisfying the basest physical needs. Beyond that, he describes at certain points in his narrative the need for emotional repression, particularly of rage. At times, the rage seems on the verge of breaking through—for instance, when Goetz visits Germany forty years after liberation in 1995. But for the vast majority of the time, Sam Goetz appears to channel his traumatic adolescence in the clutches of Nazism into a demonstrably successful adulthood—indeed, into a life of family happiness, professional achievement, and community leadership. This success comes through clearly in *I Never Saw My Face*. It also has

become clear to me after a decade of work and friendship with Sam Goetz, during which time I have developed enormous respect for his intelligence, integrity, modesty, and resolve.

It may be asked: do we need another Shoah memoir? Is not the literary market flooded with memoirs, diaries, and historical monographs on the subject? Even if that were so, we have not yet come close to understanding, and may well never, the full dimensions of the tragedy. Every survivor voice deserves to be heard—not only to recall those that were extinguished, but to provide a richer understanding of the multi-dimensional experience of life and death that we call the Holocaust. We are in the particular debt of Dr. Sam Goetz, for he has offered us such a voice—and a powerful and tersely eloquent one at that.