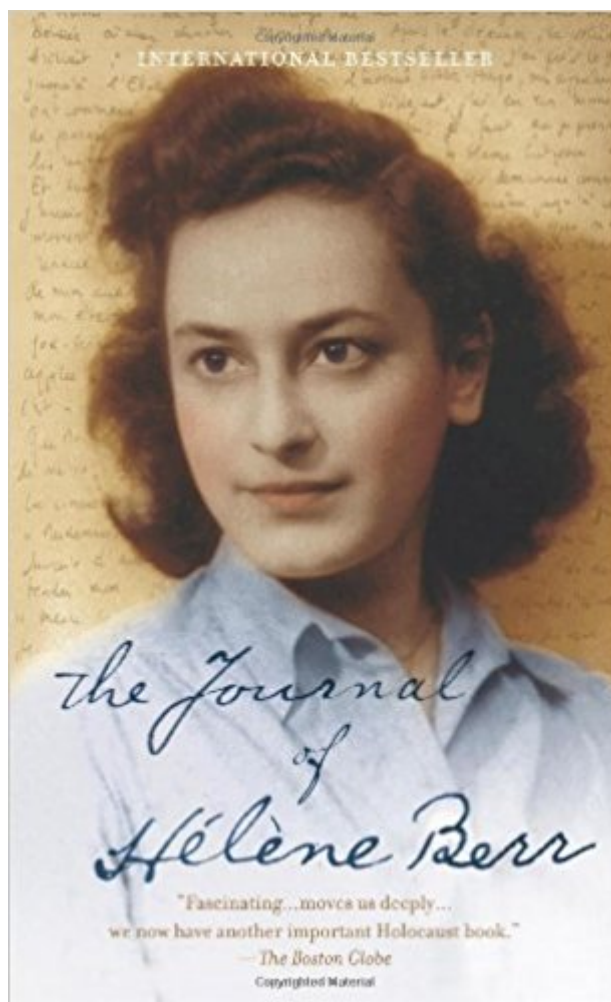


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The Journal Of Helene Berr



Synopsis

Not since The Diary of Anne Frank has there been such a book as this: The joyful but ultimately heartbreaking journal of a young Jewish woman in occupied Paris, now being published for the first time, 63 years after her death in a Nazi concentration camp. On April 7, 1942, Anne Berr, a 21-year-old Jewish student of English literature at the Sorbonne, took up her pen and started to keep a journal, writing with verve and style about her everyday life in Paris — about her studies, her friends, her growing affection for the “boy with the grey eyes,” about the sun in the dewdrops, and about the effect of the growing restrictions imposed by France’s Nazi occupiers. Berr brought a keen literary sensibility to her writing, a talent that renders the story it relates all the more rich, all the more heartbreaking. The first day Berr has to wear the yellow star on her coat, she writes, “I held my head high and looked people so straight in the eye they turned away. But it’s hard.” More, many more, humiliations were to follow, which she records, now with a view to posterity. She wants the journal to go to her fiancé, who has enrolled with the Free French Forces, as she knows she may not live much longer. She was right. The final entry is dated February 15, 1944, and ends with the chilling words: “Horror! Horror! Horror!” Berr and her family were arrested three weeks later. She went “as was discovered later” on the death march from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen, where she died of typhus in April 1945, within a month of Anne Frank and just days before the liberation of the camp. The journal did eventually reach her fiancé, and for over fifty years it was kept private. In 2002, it was donated to the Memorial of the Shoah in Paris. Before it was first published in France in January 2008, translation rights had already been sold for twelve languages.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I had a sense of sinking and could only repeat: Stop. Stop. Stop., every fiber of my body engaged in stopping the unrelenting forward march of the Nazis. Of course I knew ultimately what was in store for the young French Jew Helene Berr, but as I read the new English translation of *The Journal Of Helene Berr*, I found myself helpless to do anything less than hope against hope that she and her family, and the women of the U.G.I.F. and the orphaned children, indeed all those who would be touched by the hand of evil, would be spared. The Journal is the intimate, enchanting diary of the appealing, whip smart Helene Berr. Twenty-one, an eager, romantic student at the Sorbonne, Helene entrusts her most intimate hopes and dreams, passions and fears to her journal through the tense, horrifying years of 1942 through 1944. As the German presence in Paris becomes increasingly ubiquitous and rumors swirl and solidify into terrifying fact, Helene writes. She writes of the death of a puppy love, the flowering of a new, deeper love, the arrest of her father, the arrests and murders of friends and strangers, and her need to be courageous, not only for herself, but for others. With wit, clarity, and an almost shocking intelligence, she allows us to see a huge historical event through the eyes of one and thereby the whole. She embodies the consternation that thousands must have felt when confronted with the order to wear the yellow star identifying them as Jews: "This evening I've changed my mind: I now think it is cowardly not to wear it, vis-à-vis people who will. Only, if I do wear it, I want to stay very elegant and dignified at all times so that people can see what that means. I want to do whatever is most courageous. This evening I believe that means wearing the star."

Helene Berr - an assimilated French Jew - started writing a journal during the German occupation in April 1942 when she was 21 years old. Her family was well-to-do and she studied at the Sorbonne. She was intelligent, cultured, and sensitive, had many friends, and loved life. For a time her life under the Germans remained fairly normal. She continued to visit friends and the family's summer place in the country, read English literature, and played violin at small recitals. She fell in love with a young man and wrote of her passion for nature and poetry. Things started to change for her when Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star. She began to feel different from other people and thought about fleeing to the south of France where it was supposedly safer for Jews. However, she couldn't bring herself to act in what she considered a "cowardly" way and decided to remain in Paris. She wrote about the roundups of Jews and their transfer to transit camps like Gurs and

Drancy - and from there, somewhere to the east. Many of her friends were snatched off the streets and deported with no notice whatsoever. At this point she helped out at a Jewish aid organization, taking orphaned children for nature walks and working at the group's headquarters - until the Germans closed it and the children were deported. Her last entry in February 1944 reads: "Horror. Horror. Horror." She was deported and sent to Auschwitz and later to Bergen-Belsen. By chance, Anne Frank, the famous diary writer, was there at the same time. Helene contracted typhus (also like Anne) and died after a beating a few days before the camp was liberated. Helene Berr's journal is unique and moving and deserves to be widely read.

There is no shortage of books on the Holocaust. We have, of course, the diary of Anne Frank, which appears to be the definitive nonfiction work recording World War II. It always seems more difficult, though, to find out what the war was like in France, as most accounts by or about Jews seem to focus on eastern Europe. Helene Berr was a French university student at the time of the war. A violin player and student of English literature, she wrote a journal that by any account would be considered an accomplishment in style, literary analysis and flow. Her prose is beautiful, and you almost forget that you are reading about the Holocaust, as it is just as interesting to read her thoughts on music and literature. Again, a comparison with Anne Frank seems the best way to illustrate Berr's own journal. Frank lived in the Secret Annex and had nothing else to do but write for long hours in her diary. Once she heard that diaries were going to be collected after the war, she even went back and began to edit it with the intent of publication. It was written because she was a regular girl who kept a journal whenever she had the free time. Not everyone knows what it feels like to live in Nazi-occupied Paris, but more of us do know what it feels like to be in love with two people at once or to be frustrated with your family, friends or schoolwork. In that basic humanity, we can insert ourselves immediately into Berr's world, and then we follow her into the darker times, as the Gestapo gain more and more control over it. Berr's family struggles to hold on when her father is taken to a prison. The man she loves is forced to flee France for his safety, and she watches as friends and neighbors are taken by the Gestapo to various prisons and camps.

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