

Götz and Meyer by David Albahari.
(Translated from the Serbian by Ellen Elias-Bursac).
The Harvill Press 2004.

David Albahari was born in Serbia but lives and works in Canada. He has written many books in Serbian of which this is the first to be translated into English and published in Britain. Götz and Meyer is a novel set during the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia that sheds light on a part of the Holocaust in its 'pre-industrial' phase. I refer to the gassing by carbon monoxide of small numbers in hermetically sealed trucks which drove around while the occupants died, disposed of them and returned for a fresh cargo.

Götz and Meyer, SS soldiers, are the drivers of one of these trucks, responsible for the killing of 5,000 Belgrade Jews, over 60 of whom were the narrator's relatives. The storyteller not only describes the process but also the conditions in the holding camp on the Belgrade fairground, the way Götz and Meyer handled their 'job', and the effect that his researches had on him.

This is a short book but it is beautifully written and extremely powerful. There are no paragraph indents in the text, just pages full of blocks of letters, engendering at times a sense of suffocation that parallels in a tiny way that felt by the hapless souls in the back of Götz and Meyer's truck.

Extrapolations from the Götz and Meyer microcosm of the Holocaust to the bigger picture serve to reinforce the psychosis of Nazism and the full horror of their genocide of those they deemed undesirable.

Anyone interested in this darkest chapter of Jewish history should read this book.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh