

The Seventh Well by Fred Wander, translated by Michael Hoffmann.
Granta 2008.

The Diary of Petr Ginz, edited by Chava Pressburger with a foreword by
Jonathan Safran Foer. Atlantic Books 2008.

As the years grow separating us from the events of the Shoah, it seems that memoirs from it, and stories set during its hideous time, are being published with greater frequency. And in spite of and, perhaps, because of the decades that now separate us from the Second World War, and the attempted genocide of the Jewish people by Nazi Germany, these publications have more rather than less poignancy and power.

Neither the Seventh Well nor the Diary of Petr Ginz take that long to read, but each in its own way is a book whose contents is likely to affect the reader for a very long time afterwards.

The Seventh Well is a work of fiction, but it is based on the wartime experiences of a Viennese Jew called Fred Wander who fled his homeland in 1938, got to France via Switzerland, and after sojourns in various holding camps in France was deported to Auschwitz in 1942. The stories in the book, 12 in all, tell of incidents and individuals in the camps, the latter painted in vivid and heart-wrenching literary colours. The Seventh Well presents all the horror of camp life, the arbitrariness, brutality and mindless suffering, but also the courage, mystery and humour. Each of the tales has its own appeal, but it is *What Does the Forest Make You Think Of?* that moved me to tears, and which I cannot get out of my mind.

The Diary of Petr Ginz, edited by his sister Chava Pressburger, provides a snap shot of the life of a half-Jewish Czech boy written over a period of two years, 1942-1944, from the ages of 14 to 16, when he was taken to Auschwitz, where he died, from Terezin to which he had earlier been deported. The actual diary is interspersed with Petr's poems and drawings and concludes with some of his writings. The boy who emerges from the diary is creative, sensitive and ordinary, but living in extraordinary and terrifying times. In between references to walks with his friends are references to deportations and other aktionen by the Germans, and especially the punitive strikes following the assassination of Reinhold Heydrich. It is a snap shot of one tiny aspect of the Shoah, and in the stories it part-tells of different Jewish families may be discerned the macrocosm of Europe-wide genocide.

Both of these books should be read by anyone interested in the best and worst of human nature at times of severe stress and trauma.

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