

In Sight • Perspective

## This book provides an intimate look at lives forever changed by the Holocaust

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Auschwitz (Max Hirshfeld)



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While there have been many books about the Holocaust, Max Hirshfeld's book, "Sweet Noise: Love in Wartime" (Damiani, 2019) is a uniquely intimate and personal one. The first part of the book introduces us to Hirshfeld's mother and father, both Holocaust survivors, through letters they wrote to each other. In the second part of the book, Hirshfeld takes us with him on a journey made with his mother back to Poland as she attempted to find some closure to the traumatic events she endured. The combination of these two parts gives us an incredibly intimate insight into one of the most horrific events ever to occur.

Hirshfeld grew up in Alabama, the son of parents who survived Auschwitz. As a young boy he would hear his father struggling with his memories at night. Hirshfeld relates this in the beginning of "Sweet Noise: Love in Wartime."

"In the house where I grew up, my bedroom was closest to the front door. I was convinced that should anyone get in I would be the first to be attacked, so I insisted that my door be left open at night. If an intruder appeared my parents would surely hear my cry for help.

"But the only sounds I heard through that open door were from my father as he struggled in his sleep. His memories from the holocaust came from a place much darker than the darkness of my room, and though I was aware of my parents' history early in my life, it would be many years before the instinct to try to tell their story would surface and help me understand those troubled nights."

Hirshfeld felt compelled to understand his parents' stories, and he began to piece them together bit by bit throughout the years. Shortly after his daughter was born in 1980, Hirshfeld's father began telling him stories about his experiences during the Holocaust. Not surprisingly, the stories were wrenching.

One summer, while sitting in the stifling heat at a beach house in North Carolina, Hirshfeld's father told him about being forced into a windowless room at Buchenwald. His father recounted: "The guards kept squeezing men into the claustrophobic space until they became frantic with fear. A friend had a knife and began stabbing people, dragging my father with him as he pushed his way toward the door."

Thirteen years after listening to his father open up about his experiences, Hirshfeld accompanied his mother on the trip to Poland, where she was trying to find closure for her own experiences. The photographs Hirshfeld took on that trip are an emotionally haunting component to his quest to understand his parents' stories.

Out of these experiences, Hirshfeld began trying to write a book about his family's history, but felt there was still something missing. A few years before his mother died, she gave him a box with various mementos in it, including a trove of love letters she and his father had exchanged decades earlier. These letters would turn out to be instrumental in helping Hirshfeld piece their story together. As he says in his book:

"As the first few translations became available, I began to understand how their intimate dialogue could fill the gaps in my earlier efforts and allow me to tell a richer, more profound story. The letters created a manuscript of their hearts and provided a rare firsthand perspective on their tale of perseverance in the face of almost impossible odds.

"Along with the photographs, I now had the tools I needed to better understand my parents and their missing history, and to tell the story they could no longer tell themselves."

Combining his parents' letters with the photos he took on his trip back to Poland with his mother, Hirshfeld has put together not only a powerful reminder of the costs of the Holocaust, but also a searing reminder of the humanity of the people who paid the heaviest tolls. As American diplomat and attorney Stuart E. Eizenstat says at the end of the book:

"There have been hundreds of books on the Holocaust and other personal accounts by survivors. But *Sweet Noise* is special and compelling because it tells the larger history through the lives of Max's Polish-born parents, who met in 1943 in the Polish ghetto of Zawiercie and had a secret romance while they waited to be deported to the death camps."



Warsaw (Max Hirshfeld)



Zawiercie (Max Hirshfeld)