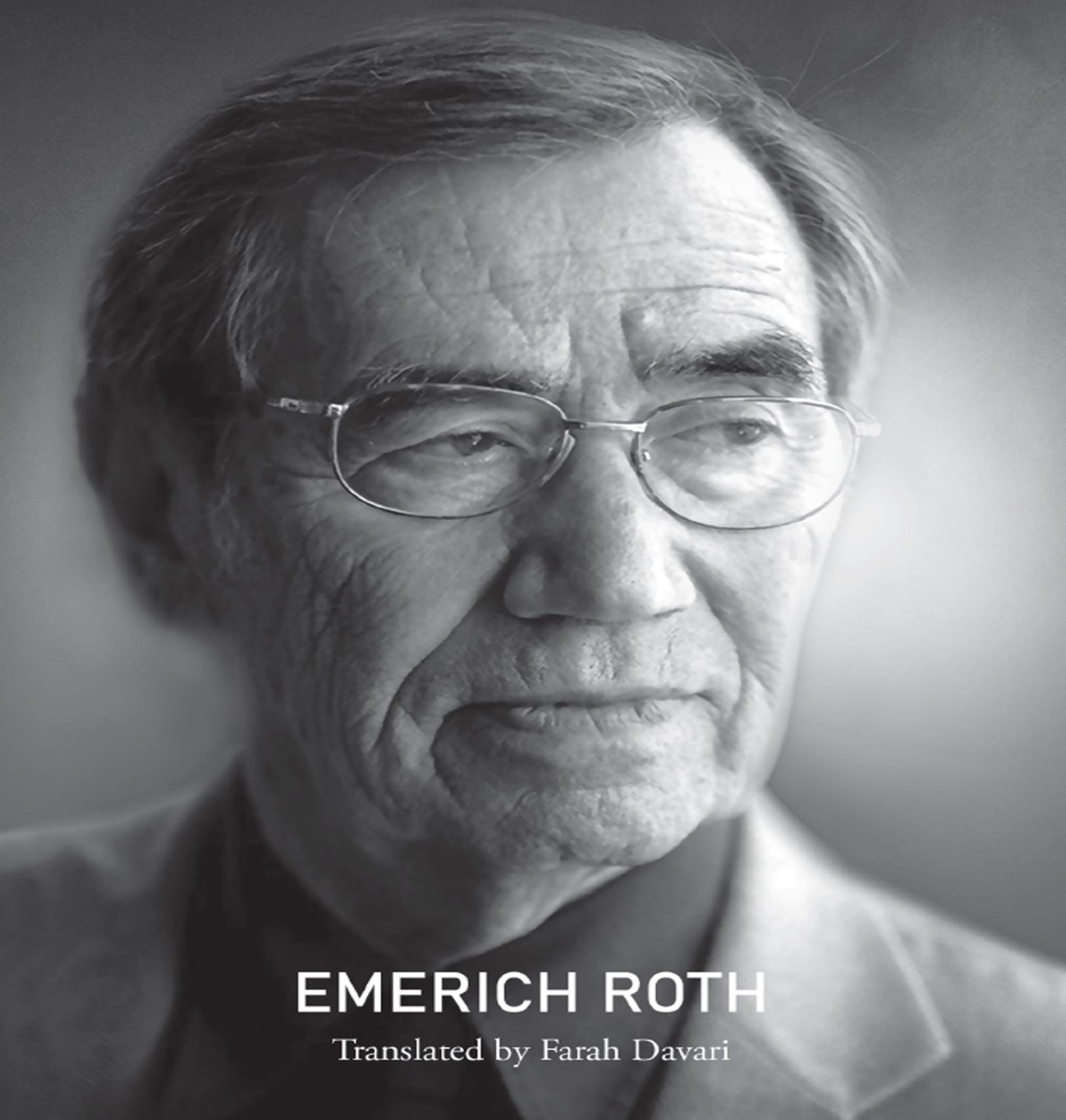


WITNESSING *&* SURVIVING
THE HOLOCAUST



EMERICH ROTH

Translated by Farah Davari

Emerich has worked persistently against racism, neo-Nazism and violence in Swedish society today. He has received well-deserved acknowledgements and appreciation because of his tireless efforts. He has also initiated numerous awards and scholarships for students.

“How can we ask that people who live far away from us to stop fighting and killing each other unless we are able to create mutual understanding by helping another human being in our midst?”

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CHAPTER 1

MY CRIME: I WAS A JEW

You have probably heard this story, or one similar to mine, once before. It is the story of one of the most horrid crimes in the history of humankind. The one referred to as the Final Solution to the Jewish Question, or *Nacht und Nebel*, in German, meaning “night and mist.” Which is, of course, paraphrased in more or less poetic words instead of using the accurate term, *Holocaust*, or the annihilation of an entire ethnic group. In other words, cruel and cold-blooded murder.

Emerich is my name. I am an old man now, shaped by the experiences of a rich and diverse life. Although a rich life doesn't always mean a safe and happy one. This book is about the story of my life during the Second World War and about what took place inside the German concentration camps. Surely, you have seen countless images from those extermination camps—blurred photographs showing mass graves, where piles of corpses had been neatly stacked as wood, or rows of corpses hanging in gallows. All against a grotesque background of watchtowers and electrified barbed-wire fences. Images that, despite their context, are illusively displayed. Images of an inapprehensible malice, difficult, not to say impossible, to grasp. Perhaps you have also watched documentaries that show people standing in long lines, heading toward gas chambers and execution. You can sense horror, total impotence, and deepest humiliation, sometimes even a desperate kind of hope, regardless of the fact these flickering footages were often captured by clumsy amateurs. In this way, the executioners made their own record of the Holocaust. Maybe you have seen the picture of the gate to Auschwitz, with its cynical slogan—“*Arbeit macht frei*,” meaning, “Work sets you free.” That could be the image etched in your memory. However, in hindsight, we know the most likely way out of there was

through the crematory chimneys. They used various manners and methods to kill their victims: shooting, gassing, killing by poison, starvation, medical experiments, torture, and the list goes on. You see, they didn't exactly suffer from lack of ingenuity. The camera lies, as you know, but not always. Those indistinct photographs and images have one thing in common: They no longer represent humans, but what's left of them, disfigured by torture, emaciated bodies, deprived of all dignity. They represent us as humans who have lost our human worth. And that was how the Nazis made the Final Solution possible and the violence legitimate. Well, who would accuse anybody of exterminating vermin and call it murder?

Auschwitz. Chelmo. Treblinka. Majdanek. Sobibor. These death factories, the concentration camps, were actually denied at that time until the day the Allied forces marched in. Even now, there are some people who claim these camps never really existed. They are nothing but a propaganda scam due to the lack of evidence, some say. Today Auschwitz, the largest German extermination camp, is a museum. The artifacts have been arranged somewhat in a pointless precision. You can see piles of shoes and clothes neatly sorted out in adult's and children's sections, along with bags, dentures, artificial legs, glasses, and even human hair. They all speak clearly of what kind of a reception these victims had to endure upon arrival as they were robbed of everything. There are also the death lists, carefully prepared in black and white to validate the true essence of this agony. Surely, this is evidence enough. There are still a few of us survivors left who can testify on behalf of those who didn't survive. Some of the doctors, commandants, and executioners who worked at the Nazi concentration camps have also testified about what took place behind those barbed-wire fences. We are all old now, and many have passed away, of course. At the hands of time, we are all bound to be treated equally, in the end.

My crime? Being a Jew! Bear in mind the fact this persecution didn't only affect the Jews, but it all started by terminating the physically and the mentally disabled people through euthanasia. Furthermore, as the witch hunt continued, people who considered to be of a low-standing breed, such as gypsies, Slavs, and communists, were also sent to the concentration camps. People from all kinds of different ethnic groups were incarcerated at the camps. Nazism was a racial ideology, with the Aryan race being the superior one. Religion played a subordinated role in the Third Reich.

But how could this happen? You might ask, “Is it really necessary to raise the issues of anti-Semitism and the extermination of the Jewish people once again? After all, these events happened more than seventy years ago. The perpetrators responsible for these crimes are long gone. So why bring out all the nasty memories from the past?”

The answer is simple: the evil has many faces. The hatred and the haters are still very much alive among us all. They appear in many different shapes and names, but I call them haters. The content of their views and ideas may seem unlike the old Nazis, yet if you study them closely you will recognize the resemblance, although the new generation of Nazis are careful not to mention the Final Solution. Nevertheless, they deny the Holocaust and what went on at the German concentration camps. In their opinion, these are just Jewish fabrications, and they dismiss all the facts about the camps as fictional. It is obvious to notice how the racial and anti-Semitic views are gaining more power and becoming rougher in their appearance. Those of us who have seen the growth of fascism with our own eyes can easily recognize what’s going on. There are only a few harmless incidents, mostly gang fights. We hardly see any major political force threatening our democracy. And there is no sign of the rising of a Fourth Reich. But we have learned from history that it can all happen again. The hatred and the persecution have always existed, constantly evolving. To quote the historian Raul Hilberg, “The Nazi destruction process didn’t come out of a void. It was the culmination of a cyclical trend. First the missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: “You have no right to live among us as Jews.” The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed: You have no right to live among us. The German Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live.”

Hatred is the driving force behind all wars. Sweden is not threatened by war. The wars we must confront here are of a different kind, mostly rooted in ethnic and religious prejudice. Our ability to go through hardship and painful experiences as humans is marvelous. It took many years for my physical and psychological wounds to heal. They may not always be visible outwardly, but all Holocaust survivors have been scarred for life. But it is possible to rise from humiliation and move on. My experience has taught me to overcome anger and resentment by facing the world with tolerance and positivity. I know this for sure because of what I have been through before, during and after the war. I witnessed as a child how anti-Semitism,

which at first was nothing but a silly religious misconception, grew like cancer, eating away the entire society and finally became a political doctrine. I witnessed how anti-Semitic orations grew exceedingly, gaining unlimited power. A power manifested through countless atrocities and mass murder. Ordinary decent people suddenly became hostile and blind as they were swept away by the mass psychosis that Nazism and fascism gradually created.

You might wonder if there were only fascist and Nazi supporters everywhere, and nobody stood up or protested against this collective mania. Well, of course there were people who resisted, but they did it secretly and in silence. All political resistance was obviously dangerous, and those who took part in such operations risked their lives. Even so, we should be aware of the real danger that is behind silence and passivity. Attitudes and ideas are easily converted. History repeats itself is a saying, but unfortunately it is true. What happened in Bosnia about twenty years ago is similar to what happened in Europe about seventy years ago. Even though there was no talk of the Final Solution, the Bosnian genocide was an act of ethnic cleansing. We must learn to draw conclusions from history instead of declaring all clear as soon as the storm has passed. We should be careful not to think that fascism is just a dead and forgotten part of history, and it belongs to the past. I am convinced that history is going to repeat itself as long as we do not learn from it. Therefore, I decided to write this book. I kept silent for more than fifty years, but because of the increasing level of violence around us, I consider it my duty to raise awareness and spread knowledge about Nazism and the Holocaust. It is only through relentless efforts that we are able to counteract.

I also want to shed light on and talk about the psychological mechanism that is activated when a person is cast down in deep humiliation, and what happens to a person who is completely uprooted. Parents who have suffered in their childhoods are often unaware of how those memories and experiences affect the way they raise their children. So their traumas are inherited from one generation to the next. The suffering goes on, and a vicious circle arises. Those circles can be broken.

With this book, I want to show you the power of the remarkable strength a human being has inside. How one person is able to rise from the deepest pit of degradation and still stay positive. You see, it is almost like a diamond that must be refined under heavy pressure, deep down in the heart

of the mountain. A human can also be refined through their life experiences and become a positive and creative individual. This is the story of my life experiences, but it could also be the story of many who did not survive to tell theirs. I kept silent for too long, mostly because it was too painful to tell. That was the way most of them felt.

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