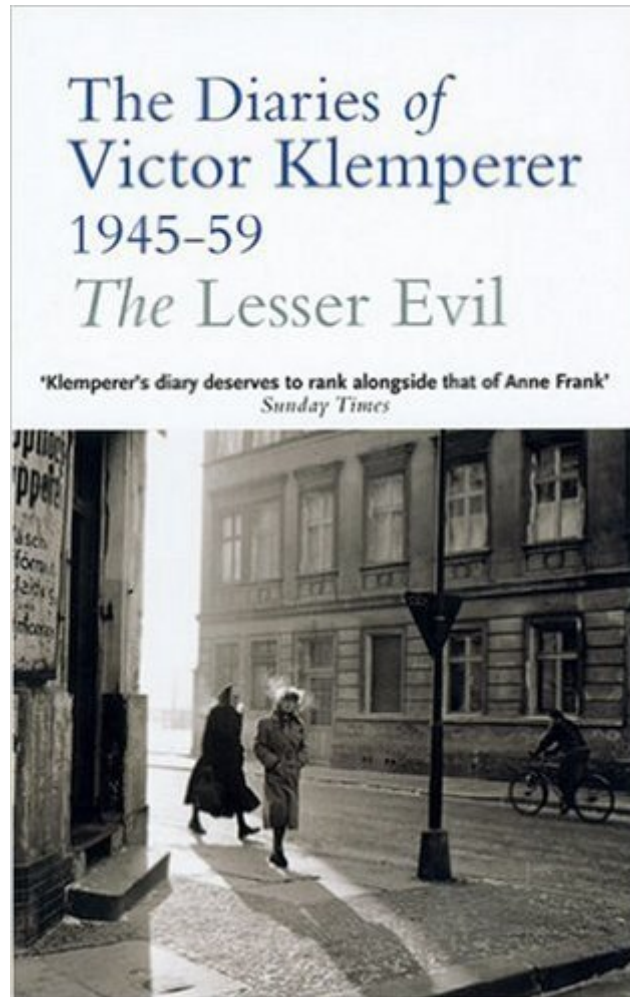


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The Lesser Evil: The Diaries Of Victor Klemperer 1945-59



Synopsis

This final volume of Victor Klemperer's diaries opens in 1945. After the horrors of the war, Victor and Eva's return to their Dresden home seems like a fairytale. Victor tries to resume his distinguished academic career and joins East Germany's Communist Party. In 1951, Eva dies; a year later, aged 70, Victor marries a student; an unlikely but successful love match. But with the growing repression of the Communist Party, and the memory of those who did not survive, Victor's achievements ring hollow. Politics, he comes to believe, is, above all, the choice of the lesser evil. • A masterpiece both of Holocaust literature and memoir.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Victor Klemperer's *The Lesser Evil* completes his three volume diary as a Jewish college professor in Germany from 1933 to 1959. In this volume, he covers the years from the end of the Second World War until his final illness and to my mind provides the most rewarding literary experience. To be sure, his account of the tightening Nazi noose following Hitler's ascension to power and the horrors and restrictions of the war years as a Jew married to an "Aryan" woman have few equals in Holocaust literature. Only the fire bombing of Dresden on the eve of a scheduled deportation of his city's remaining handful of Jews and their spouses allowed him to survive. But the post-war years provide the fascinating portrait of a genteel intellectual dedicated to the rule of reason (a major scholarly pursuit as a Professor of Romance Languages and Literature involves his work on the French Enlightenment) trying to balance between the resurgent militarism and consumerism of the triumphant western powers and the repression of a socialist German Democratic Republic, the title's

"lesser evil" where he chooses to live. Klemperer is keenly aware of his own inconsistencies as a secular humanist with a deep appreciation of traditional spiritual values, often describing his situation as one of falling between the two chairs of the East-West confrontation that became the Cold War. In 1951, the grieving widower remarries within a year, feeling both guilt and gratitude and humbled by two women more talented and generous than himself. Hardly heroic, he manages to seem admirable as he struggles to keep afloat despite terrible times and petty academic politics.

This diary by Victor Klemperer represents the good Professor's private thoughts of life as he saw it in East Germany during the post war years of 1945 through 1959. Having been lucky enough to survive WWII as a Jew living in Germany, one would think that life in post war Germany would be much easier. At the end of the war Klemperer and his wife Eva found themselves in the American occupation sector. Despite being Jewish and with his hometown of Dresden almost completely destroyed, he insists on returning and living in the Russian East German sector. As described in the diary, we see how Russia deals with the reeducation and punishment of Nazi's and how surviving Jews are upgraded in German society. Klemperer tells us of his re-installment as a full Professor and becomes a published Author and man of letters. During this post war period Klemperer becomes involved in Communist politics and asserts that life in the GDR (East Germany) is the lesser evil of the two Germanys during this "Cold War" period. It is this ongoing inner argument of which German government is right that puts Klemperer in the so called position of "between two stools", which means he can't please all the people he associates with because he seeks one true and benevolent entity but neither one really suffices. Along with Klemperer's inner political torture, he has to deal with the death of his first wife Eva and the marriage to his very young wife Hadwig. Klemperer mentions death all during his 15 years of diary entries much as he did during his war entries. His health as he says was always bad, much as during the Nazi regime. In retrospect bad health or not, Klemperer lived over 78 years. Klemperer shows his struggles and inner doubts along with his desire for fulfillment, vanity and the search for academic excellence. In many instances he is much too hard on himself. His diary marks the time of life in a Germany which no longer exists. In the end politics in Germany aggravated him to no end. In retrospect there really was no "lesser evil". This last diary from Klemperer gives great insight from an educated man living behind the iron curtain. This is a fitting finale of a set of diaries on the order of Samuel Pepys.

This third Klemperer diary is much less exciting than the previous two (unsurprising, as the Nazi years and the war are now over) and also much less comprehensive. The first diary covered nine

years; the second three and a half; this one covers a little over thirteen years in about the same number of pages as the first two books. The editor marked omissions with ellipses, and I don't know if there was a single entry that didn't have at least one. Sometimes entire entries were eliminated and the editor summarized them in brackets. But, looking at what was left, I don't think I missed much. After the armistice Victor Klemperer and his wife Eva experienced a remarkable, 180-degree turn of fortune. They got their house back. He was feted by everybody, as they were all anxious to demonstrate that THEY had not been Jew-hating Nazis, thank you very much (try Googling the Chad Mitchell Trio song "The I Was Not A Nazi Polka" to see what I mean). Wealth, fame and international travel, to as far away as China, followed as Klemperer's academic career rose from the grave and he became a minor celebrity within East Germany. Yet from my reading of the diary I can't say Klemperer's postwar years were happy ones. He considered Communism the "lesser evil" to capitalism, but he was uneasy about the similarities he noticed between the Communist government and the Nazis. He witnessed the revival of anti-Semitism and the rise of Holocaust denial. He got embroiled in petty academic infighting while becoming convinced that his star was only on the ascendancy for lack of competitors within East Germany. Eva Klemperer died in 1951 and Victor remarried within a year to Hadwig, a former student who was twenty-five years to his seventy. They deeply loved one another, but he felt guilty for his seeming "betrayal" of Eva and for denying Hadwig her youth and the possibility of children. And, in the final years, his health went into a marked decline, forcing Hadwig to be a nursemaid to him more often than not. Were it not for the deep impression Klemperer's earlier diaries made on me, and my determination to see his life through, I probably would not have finished this book. But this diary is a good picture of what life was like during the early years of the German Democratic Republic, before the Berlin Wall was erected, and therefore it's of much historical interest. Unlike the first two diaries I think this one can stand on its own.

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