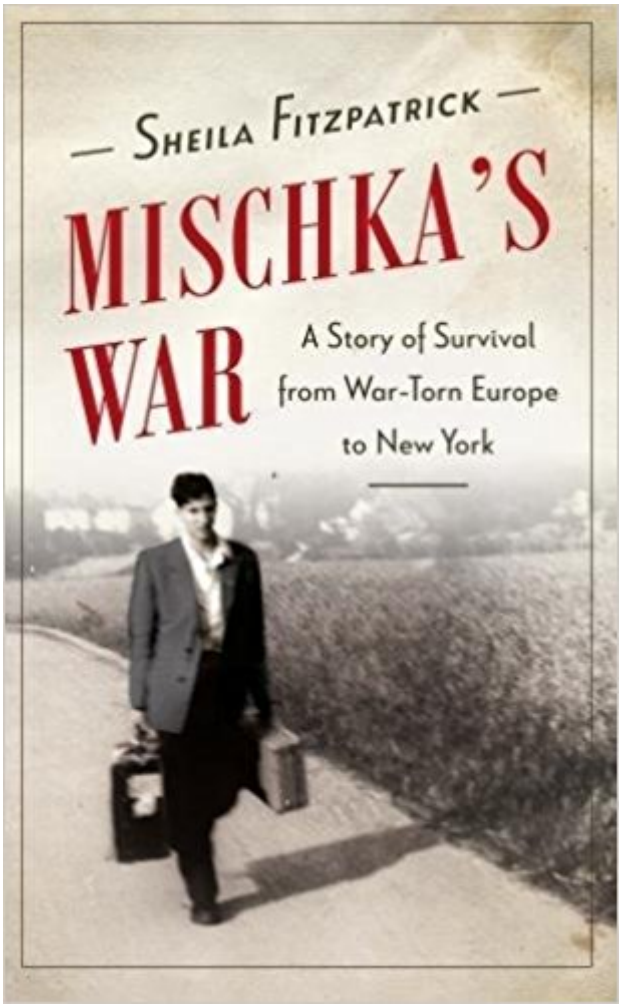
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Mischka's War: A True Story Of Survival In Nazi Dresden



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Synopsis

In 1943, 22-year-old Latvian Mischka Danos chanced on a terrible sight - a pit filled with the bodies of Jews killed by the occupying Germans. A few months later, escaping conscription into the Waffen-SS in Riga, Mischka entered Hitler's Reich itself on a student exchange to Germany. There, as the war drew to an end, he narrowly escaped death in the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden. As he made his escape from Hitler's Reich he fell ill and was incarcerated in hospital before finally reuniting with his resourceful mother Olga, who had made her own way out of Riga, saving some Jews along the way. The diaries, correspondence and later recollections of mother and son provide a vivid recreation of life in occupied Germany, where anxiety, fear and loss were tempered by friendship, and where the ineptitude of international and occupation bureaucracies added its own touch of black humour. Sponsored as immigrants by one of the Jews Olga had saved, they eventually reached New York in the early 1950s. As refugee experiences go, they were among the lucky onesÃ¢â ¬â ¢but even luck leaves scars. The author, who met and married Mischka forty years after these events, turns her skills as a historian and wry eye as a memoirist to telling this remarkable story.

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Customer Reviews

Mischka Danos was able to make himself invisible if danger was in the offing, he could become totally still and unnoticeable, before silently melting away into the shadows. His third wife, the eminent historian of Soviet Russia, Sheila Fitzpatrick, witnessed it, twice, when they were confronted by muggers in the 1990s. She was amazed by how well it worked. But by then he was a

past master at avoiding trouble. Danos, a theoretical physicist, was born in Riga in 1922. Latvia was a punchbag for warring peoples during the 1940s, but he escaped conscription into the Latvian, German and Russian armies, despite being eligible for call-up every time. At the end of the war when Latvia was absorbed into the Soviet Union, Danos was in Germany, in the American sector. Although technically a displaced person, he managed to secure a place (and comfortable digs) at Hanover University, and then at Heidelberg. His qualifications achieved, he married a German girl, set sail for New York and developed a successful career at several universities, being particularly remembered for his work on medical imaging devices. He died in 1999. A few years later, Fitzpatrick opened a box heÃ¢â ¬â„¢d left behind. It contained his own diaries, along with his motherÃ¢â ¬â„¢s, all their long correspondence and many more documents and photographs. She could not resist trying to describe, to re-create even, the young man she never knew. To her surprise, however, the most important character of the resultant story proves to be Olga Danos, MischkaÃ¢â ¬â„¢s long-dead mother. Endlessly resourceful, warm-hearted and generous, she managed to smuggle Jews out of the Riga ghetto, under cover of employing them under contract with the German army in her tailoring workshop. She cut seven years off her age to get to America, where she married a Japanese butler and settled in Florida. She really deserves a book of her own. As for Mischka, the central episode of his war began in the spring of 1944, when he decided, astonishingly, to move to Germany. He explained that heÃ¢â ¬â„¢d thought the war would soon be over and the Russians would return to Riga: he wanted to continue to study physics, and Germany was considered the best place for it. Besides, heÃ¢â ¬â„¢d have a chance of getting to the west when it was all over. And so it proved. But he chose to go to Dresden. It went well at first. The place was civilised, peaceful and beautiful. He even took a cheerful touring holiday around Germany in the winter of 1944-45. A slightly sour note is struck when Fitzpatrick mentions a letter, dated December 15 1944, from the Ministry for Armaments and War Production. It concerns his invention of Ã¢â ¬Å“an acoustic pathfinding apparatusÃ¢â ¬Â• and thanks Mischka for the Ã¢â ¬Å“great interest he shows for the defence of the Third ReichÃ¢â ¬Â•. He later claimed to have systematically sought not to have helped the German war effort, but a question-mark hovers over that episode. Deciding it was time to leave Dresden, he held a farewell party in his lodgings on February 13 1945. His account of what followed, reproduced almost verbatim, is the central episode of this book: it is chilling, both in content and in the curious detachment of the narrator. The first sign of trouble is that the door, which had been closed, silently falls into the room. Pretty soon, his guests realise what is happening and disperse, but a girl he has invited lives the other side of town and he decides, reluctantly that he should see her home. They scramble to a hilltop and watch as

the Allied bombing intensifies. As usual, the girl is anonymous and he the hero of the hour. Ã¢â ¬Å“The sight is mesmerizing; I stand there hypnotized, a 20th-century NeroÃ¢â ¬Â•. It becomes louder, hotter, closer, more terrifying. They hide in a shell hole, then take cover in a bunker. The next day they clamber over the steaming, smoking rubble of the city, confronted by unimaginable, unforgettable horrors and eventually get to her house, where he is fed and put to bed between clean sheets and Ã¢â ¬â ¢ for him Ã¢â ¬â ¢ it is over. In her afterword, Fitzpatrick worries that her book might be a kind of betrayal: her researches have made even her critical of him, of his cavalier attitude to girls, his casual racial stereotyping, and what she calls his Ã¢â ¬Å“loud silencesÃ¢â ¬Â• about the Jewish question and Nazism. She could be right.Sadly, the loveable older man she remembers is not discernible in these pages. Danos comes across as conceited, selfish and patronising, boasting that he is Ã¢â ¬Å“uncategorizeableÃ¢â ¬Â•. He was never known to apologise. But his mother was terrific. (Sue Gaisford, Financial Times 2017-08-01)

Sheila Fitzpatrick is Emerita Professor of History at the University of Chicago and Honorary Professor of History at the University of Sydney. One of the most acclaimed historians of twentieth-century Russia, she is the author of several books, including The Russian Revolution; StalinÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Peasants, Everyday Stalinism, Tear off the Masks! and A Spy in the Archive: A Memoir of Cold War Russia (I.B.Tauris, 2013).

In 1989, Sheila Fitzpatrick, an Australian historian, met Mischka Danos, a theoretical physicist originally from Latvia, on a plane. They met by chance, fell into conversation, then into love and married. They had ten years together: Mischka died in 1999.In this book, Ms Fitzpatrick pieces together MischkaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s life before she knew him, through diary entries, correspondence and recollections from others who knew him. ItÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s a way of remembering Mischka, of keeping him alive, of trying to understand his past. It also provides insights into the impact of World War II, on a family from the Baltic state of Latvia.In 1943, while skiing through the Latvian woods, Mischka Danos came across a pit filled with the bodies of Jews killed by the Germans. He was aged 22. Later, Mischka was to discover that he was part-Jewish. His father, Arpad, was a Hungarian Jew who had changed his name from Deutsch to Danos, around 1900. Did Mischka know this, I wondered, when he went on a student exchange to Germany to escape conscription into the Waffen-SS?Mischka narrowly escaped death in the fire-bombing of Dresden, became a Displaced Person in occupied Germany before finally being reunited with his mother Olga. Mischka became a member of the Heidelberg school of physics and then both he and

Olga were resettled in the USA at the beginning of the 1950s. Around the biographical facts, Ms Fitpatrick has provided the detail which brings both Mischka and Olga to life and provides the reader with the context for the choices made and the decisions taken.Sheila Fitzpatrick is Professor of History at the University of Sydney and Distinguished Service Professor Emerita of the University of Chicago. She has written several books about Soviet history, as well as two memoirs: ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã ËœMy FatherÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s DaughterÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ (2010) and ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã ËœA Spy in the ArchivesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ (2013). IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ve added these memoirs to my reading list.Note: My thanks to NetGalley and Melbourne University Publishing for providing me with a free electronic copy of this book for review purposes.Jennifer Cameron-Smith

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