



Screen Treatment

Oy Mame! Oy Mame!

I Looked into the Eyes of Evil

by

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Genre: Memoire, Holocaust History, Jewish History,

Logline: A life of trauma and questions for God.

Summary:

Sitting in the living room of his home, surrounded by his family and a videographer, 90-year-old Abraham Gutrieman recounts the story of his life. A story that he has told multiple times over the years to everyone he has come across. This time, knowing his end is near, he is intent that it should be recorded for future generations. The final chapters of the book occur later and continue until his departure from this world at the age of 95.

Abraham's story begins with his earliest memories as a young Orthodox Jewish boy living in Parysow some 50 kilometers southeast of Warsaw, Poland. His family is poor but hard-working, looking to

secure a better future for his family Abraham's father has made a down payment on a house in the nearby town of Garwolin, an act that led to his betrayal and death.

The family stunned by the loss is forced to recover through the endeavors of the children until September 1939 when Nazi Germany invades and occupies the western half of Poland, which includes Parysow. A Judenrat and Ghetto are established leading to the eventual deportation of the region's Jews to Treblinka in 1942.

During the journey, a fellow deportee uses a smuggled hacksaw to cut through the iron bars in the window of the cattle car. People are pushed out of the opening, many dying from the fall but Abraham survives and makes his way to the farm owned by a sympathetic Polish gentile known to the family. After an anxious 9-day wait his elder brother Yankel(Jacobo) arrives at the farm. Due to Yankel's indiscrete behavior in locating the farm, the two brothers are forced to spend the remainder of the war on the run.

Surviving the war and its immediate aftermath, Abraham meets and marries Frieda, with the understanding that Yankel will remain with them for some time. The three refugees make their way through Germany, Italy, Brazil to Bolivia, and finally Costa Rica. Abraham and Frieda build a family, which includes Yankel until his death at the age of 101.

This book explores Abraham's battle with poverty, evil, adversity, and his relationship with God.

Reviewer Comments:

Previously released in Spanish by the authors in Costa Rica, where they have received considerable media coverage, this book is under consideration for use in schools by that country's Department of Education.

This book has also been reviewed by several people of importance, three of who have provided Forwards to the book.

They are:

Dr. Elizabeth Odio Benito, President of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Former Minister of Justice, Vice-President of Costa Rica, and Vice-President of the International Criminal Court:

“This story (Oy, Mame!) is a living testimony that we cannot nor must we forget that hate, violence, discrimination, contempt, humiliation, anti-Semitism created the monster of the Holocaust. That Shoah must remain in the present and live in the memory of humanity, so it is not repeated. That the pain and suffering of Abraham and Jacobo through the years where their prayers were not listened to, is a universal story, it is the story of the genocide of the Jewish people. Of their women and men, that for many centuries have pilgrimed throughout the planet looking for peace. And also, it is a mirror, so Jews and we who are not Jews, and all, see ourselves reflected in the way Abraham, Jacobo, and Frieda fought together for life, for peace, with love and courage, now and forever.”

Rabbi Gershon Miletski, Former Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Costa Rica:

“Abraham Gutreiman was a name and figure that I carried with me during the fifteen years of service as Rabbi of the Orthodox Jewish Community of Costa Rica. There is no encounter by coincidence. Nothing in this world occurs by coincidence. Each connection has a reason. The history of Abraham Gutreiman summarizes, with great strength and intensity, the history of our people in general and of the previous generation, whose third part was vilely cut.

I had the opportunity to know him very personally and speak with him on many occasions. He was a habitual visitor of the Synagogue for many years and every time he went, he had something to say. Constantly he spoke with the Creator of the Universe: “Where were you at that moment?” Why did you permit these things to happen to our people?”

He, who had experienced in his own flesh, the most difficult experience of that dark epoch, felt that he had the right to ask and demand answers. Frequently he made these questions in my presence as if my help could work to obtain the desired answers.”

Merida Morales-O’Donnell, Former Director, Americas Bureau, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees:

“It is difficult to find words to describe the horrors and grief experienced by these two human beings, examples of the suffering of millions of Jews persecuted and exterminated during the Holocaust. The book reflects Abraham’s desire to keep the story alive and pass it on to future generations, in order to prevent its repetition. Unfortunately, the lessons of history are not always followed. Antisemitism and discrimination are features of today’s society, racial cleansing occurs in some parts of the world, intransigence and authoritarianism persist, resulting in restrictions to rights and liberties, persecution, and, ultimately, displacement. Today’s refugees will join Abraham Gutreiman when he moans:

“...we do not occupy a place
in any space; in any time.
We are travelers towards
an uncertain future”.

Protagonists:

Abraham Gutreiman: Born January 5, 1917. Slightly stocky build.

Yankel Gutreiman: Abraham’s elder brother by exactly 10 years, born January 5, 1907. More reserved than his brother. Thinly built.

Frieda Gutreiman (nee Goldberg): Abraham’s wife, born November 4, 1927, now some 93 years old still living with her daughter’s family in San Jose, Costa Rica.

Chana Jidis Gutreiman Goldberg - (Chany): Abraham and Frieda’s daughter. Worked for the UN High Commission for Refugees in Costa Rica. One of the authors of the book.

Mortje Izrok Gutreiman Goldberg - (Max or Maxi): Abraham and Frieda’s son is a medical doctor. One of the authors of the book.

Chana Jidis Gutreiman: Abraham's mother. A widow at 30. Died in Treblinka.

Pinche Gutreiman: Abraham's brother executed by the Nazis for leaving the Ghetto to look for food.

Boleslav Lubian (Belek): A Polish gentile and a family friend who has 5 children. Provides shelter for Abraham and Yankel.

Antagonists:

The Judenrat: The organization of senior Jews established by the occupying Germans whereby the town's Jews were to be administered and Nazi laws enforced. Members of the Judenrat who did not follow the Nazis' orders were often executed or deported.

The Polish Thief: He made them steal cows and pigs, to dig up potatoes with their bare hands before driving them away.

Polish Auxiliary Police Squad: Capture Abraham.

German Army Personnel:

Other Characters:

Mr. Jaime Tishler: The videographer that recorded Abraham's testimony when aged 90.

Note: The nature of this story involves numerous people who are only briefly mentioned

Locations/Settings:

Parysow Poland – During the 1930s a small majority Jewish town some 50 kms southeast of Warsaw, Poland. Includes the nearby town of Garwolin and the city of Warsaw, woods, the Jewish cemetery. the Garwolin cemetery and the Parysow ghetto.

The Displaced Persons Camp at Jeshin – the family fled here on September 27, 1942, staying until November 7, 1942, when they were matched to Kalisz to board the train to Treblinka.

The East Polish Countryside – Paliski's house, Bolek's farm, forests, fields, etc. Starting in November 1942 through the late summer of 1944. Cold continental winters with snows and blizzards.

Lodz, Poland – The house that Abraham and Yankel occupy where the wedding occurs.

Munich, Germany – Where daughter Chana is born

La Paz, Bolivia – The small house and apartments, shops, the University of San Andreas.

San Jose, Costa Rica – Apartments they lived in, the house they bought, the shops they operated.

Modern day Poland – Warsaw, Treblinka, Parysow, etc.

Act 1 – The Setup

Abraham Gutreiman is born into an orthodox Jewish family in Parysow, Poland in 1917. At the time, Jews are the dominant group in this town in terms of numbers. Relations with the Polish gentiles are quietly strained.

Abraham loses his father at the very early age of two. His father is traveling with a young Polish man he considers a friend to the nearby town of Garwolin to make the payment on a new home for the family. This man kills the father and steals the funds. This loss brings incredible hardship on the family especially as his father's business partners exclude the family from any benefits. His mother turns to making money by buying and supplying food products to restaurants in the area.

Unusually for Jewish Children, Abraham successfully petitions his mother to attend a local public school so he can learn Polish. Which he does until age 10 when his mother comes to the school looking for him so that he can go out to work. He finds a man who lets Abraham accompany him to Warsaw where he sells wheat seeds. He gives Abraham 10 kilos of wheat to sell, which earns him 5 zlotys. Buoyed by this success he and brother Yankel start their own business selling wheat in Warsaw. Soon his mother repays the 5 zlotys to the wheat trader.

The winds of war are brewing up again. In Germany, Hitler rises to power and starts the occupation of the Sudetenland, the remainder of Czechoslovakia, etc. before opening World War II with the September 1st 1939, invasion of Poland. Poland capitulates on October 6th. Parysow now lies in the German zone of occupation. Life deteriorates immediately for the Jews. The Germans demand the delivery of all winter clothing, shooting any Jew seen wearing overcoats, etc. The local Polish population begins to collaborate with the Germans, the silent hatred becoming vocal. The Jews are subjected to a 100 zloty per family tax and forced to wear the yellow Star of David. Attacks on businesses increase.

A Judenrat is established forcing the more prominent Jews to exercise Nazi directives over the lesser families. Assisted by a 10-man squad of Polish policemen the Judenrat delivers workers as requested by the Nazis. Many of the workers never return. When the president of the Judenrat tries to control the policemen they implicate his father, the village shochet, in illegally killing a goose. The Germans imprison both father and son. Desperate to save her husband the shochet's wife falsely implicates three other Jews from a nearby village, The Germans kill all five men.

Parysow's Jews are driven from their homes into a ghetto. To leave the ghetto means death. Kosher meat is banned by the new puppet Polish government, but some non-Jewish butchers work with the Jews to disguise the method of slaughter. Still, hunger builds in the ghetto, and some venture out searching for food, including a mother and her daughters who were executed when caught. The stricken husband pleads with the terrified Judenrat to be allowed to recover the bodies. They finally relent and the murdered are successfully recovered. One of Abraham's brothers, Pinche, is betrayed by some local

Poles on his second journey out of the ghetto and is arrested. The Germans bring Pinche before the Judenrat, which tries to secure his release to their control without success. Likewise, the pleas of Pinche's pregnant wife fail to secure his release. The Germans throw Pinche onto a cart allowing his wife, Abraham, and his mother to follow. They are taken into the forest where Pinche is shot. A few days later Pinche's wife delivers a stillborn son.

On September 27th, 1942, the Germans arrive to prepare the transfer of the Parysow ghetto to Treblinka. Many hundreds of Jews flee into the woods. The Germans determine that '1000 heads' are missing from the ghetto. The German loudspeakers announce a 1 kilo of sugar bounty for each Jew delivered by the Poles. With that, a hunt begins and many Jews are captured and beaten. The Germans announce that all Jews are to be transferred the following day. That night many Jews including Abraham, Yankel, their mother, other siblings, and their families escape through the back door of the main ghetto house. Yankel's wife and their two children are elsewhere in the ghetto and do not make it out and are sent to Treblinka the following morning. The escapees meet up in the village of Jeshin where they are directed to the center for displaced people. They find the conditions and treatment are in ways worse than in the Parysow ghetto.

In early November the Germans come to Jeshin. They round up the Jews, randomly selecting some, including Abraham's brother Moshiche, who are slaughtered. The remaining Jews are force-marched some 30 kms to Kalisz, with more random shootings along the way. A group of Poles accompanies the march beating the Jews and demanding money. Upon arrival in Kalisz, the Jews are forced to climb a staircase leaning against a wall only to then fall to the ground on the other side to the amusement of the Germans.

Act 2-The Conflict

The train to Treblinka arrives; Abraham's mother tells the remaining family that if they somehow survive to 'look for Paliski'. They are to meet at his home. As they are forced into a wagon a young man asks Abraham and Yankel to follow him. Once onboard the passengers call out for water but receive a hail of bullets in reply. The young man has a hacksaw. As the train is headed towards Treblinka he cuts through the bars across a small window in the side of the wagon. People are pushed out through the opening. Some suffer terrible injuries or die from the impact of their falls but some survive including Abraham although he is knocked unconscious. When he recovers and wanders away from the tracks and finds himself alone.

Abraham walks for days, avoiding roads and asking for food at some of the houses. Eventually, he arrives at the house of Mr. Paliski where he is welcomed. After nine days his brother Yankel arrives but has asked many Poles for directions putting them all at risk. The brothers leave the house immediately intent to live in the forest. He begins to question why God has let this happen.

During their flight, the brothers meet Boleslav Lubian, whom they call Bolek. He offers to help them and when it is particularly cold the brothers hide in Bolek's barn keeping warm with the cows. One such night Bolek's eldest son, Maniek, brings some sheep he has stolen back to the farm. Abraham admonishes him for laying tracks that might attract German attention, which is what happens. The Germans arrive at the Bolek farm and the brothers hide amongst the straw in the stable's attic. The German's use a ladder to climb into the attic but miraculously do not see the brothers although they seem to be looking directly at them. Following this close escape, Bolek's only daughter Yanina begs her

father to either turn the brothers into the Germans or bar them from coming near the farm again.

One day the brothers learn of and at night make contact with a group of nine Jews. Abraham feels foreboding and tells Yankel, who suggests that he leaves whilst Yankel will stay. The next morning Abraham hears that Poles found the group of Jews. Abraham follows the directions that a man gives him, to find Yankel has escaped the Poles' attack but with a bullet wound to his hip and unable to walk. Abraham carries Yankel on his back to Bolek's.

Over time the brothers learn of other massacres, including one where 49 Jews were murdered and buried in a cave that includes a man called Hertzog. Later after the Germans have left Poland, Hertzog's two sons find the cave and identify their father's body by the three gold coins hidden in his underwear.

The brothers come across a young Jewish boy who has been shot in the hand, which is badly infected. They have to cut it off, using urine to sterilize the wound. They hear of a Polish man who has hidden 40 Jews in a house. Later along with two other Jews, Abraham approaches a Polish home willing to ask for or to steal food. They are invited in but the Pole sends one of his sons to fetch local Poles who hunt Jews. The other two escape but Abraham is captured and given a shovel to dig his grave. One of the escaped Jews starts shooting at the Poles as Abraham tells his captors they are a part of a larger group of Jewish partisans. With his captors distracted, Abraham makes a run for it and escapes.

Later Abraham and the two Jews meet a known thief. He offers protection in return for their assistance in his illegal activities. Together the three Jews steal pigs and cows. When an opportunity presents the three Jews sell a pig themselves and it is decided that the money should go to Abraham. Next, the thief asks them to steal potatoes using only their bare hands. When they have stolen enough the thief claims that they have been seen and must leave immediately.

After two years in the woods, the Soviet Army moves through eastern Poland and on into Germany. Then Abraham and Yankel make their way to Lodz, a city that would become a focal point for Jews and the temporary capital of Poland. There they search for any surviving relatives and a place to live. To raise money Abraham takes fabric provided by a Russian and sells it in Warsaw. Eventually, they locate a cousin named Rosie. Rosie introduces Abraham to a Frieda, whom she met on the train from Russia.

Over the coming weeks, he learns about Frieda's background, how they left their hometown of Narol at the start of the war, fled to Lemberg, and how the Russians deported them to a remote area northeast of Moscow. Later they were allowed to leave the work camp and moved to Nikolsk and then Berezovka in the Ukraine before returning to Poland. On March 19th, 1947, Abraham and Frieda are married.

Whilst in Lodz Abraham and Yankel sets up a sandal factory. But by 1949 there is news of new antisemitic massacres occurring this time perpetrated by the Poles. In response, Abraham, Frieda, and Yankel traveled to Munich, West Germany by way of Bielsk (a Polish border town), Czechoslovakia, and Austria. They stayed in Munich until 1952 and during that time their daughter, Chana was born on July 10th, 1949.

Act 3-The Resolution

Abraham realizes that Europe, in general, does not offer much hope in the way of safety in which to raise their daughter and build a new life. The family then plans on emigrating to Israel where Frieda's parents had already settled. They send their personal belongings including two motorcycles, two bicycles, and a sewing machine ahead to Israel. On discovering their intent Frieda's father dissuades them from going to Israel as conditions there are very difficult in the young Jewish state. Abraham then investigates emigrating to the USA where Frieda's brother now lives but he finds that the quotas and regulations have become much more rigid.

Abraham continues his search for a refuge for his family and a friend tells him that Bolivia had no restrictions on Jewish immigration. That friend arranges the necessary visas and the family embark on a ship that makes a stop in Naples, Italy before continuing on to Brazil. After a few days in Brazil, they continue their journey to La Paz by train.

In La Paz, they are received by a growing Jewish community. Slowly they adapt to life in Bolivia, the food, culture, and customs. They rent a small house in the Miraflores neighborhood but find that Bolivia was suffering from hyperinflation so Abraham invests all his available funds in leather. He opened a store and then bought a shirt factory that unfortunately catches fire. Abraham then begins selling fabric produced for a factory called Soligno from which they prosper. Later, he begins selling men's clothing in the Sagarnaga area of La Paz and Yankel makes regular trips to the mining town of Potosí to sell clothing.

In 1955 a son is born and named after Abraham's father, Mortje Izrok, who became known as Maxi. Chana starts attending kindergarten at the Ingavi School and when she reaches the 7th grade before transferring to the new Bolivian Israelite School.

It is during this time in Bolivia that Abraham begins to deal with the damage done by the Holocaust to his faith, damage he will carry to his death. Did God abandon his people or did God save him and Yankel from the evil eyes of the Nazis in that hayloft? He continues to attend synagogue and observe the festivals to honor his parents as opposed to true faith. He finds himself engaging with other Jews many of whom carry the burden of trauma. The family makes friends and move to an apartment on Yungas Street in the center of the city. As their situation improves they move once more to an apartment on Villazon Avenue across from the Higher University of San Andres. There the family meets more Jews and spent evenings telling their stories. However, Bolivia was entering a period of revolutions and the university was always a focal point of demonstrations leading to the family and other neighbors being lockdown for several extended periods.

Chana graduates high school and goes on to study in New York and New Jersey. There she meets Aaron Goldstein whom she marries in La Paz. She later settles in Columbia with Aaron. In 1971 there is a particularly violent revolution that brings Hugo Bánzer Suárez to power. However, Maxi is in the vicinity of the university is stormed by the army and the building the family lives in receives light weapons damage. Given that the altitude of La Paz is hurting Abraham's health, he makes the decision to move to Costa Rica.

Abraham and Frieda find the climate in Costa Rica much more to their liking. Leaving Yankel and Maxi behind so that Maxi can finish school while Yankel disposes of their business, they arrive in San Jose in 1973, settling in the Pitahaya neighborhood and find a small Jewish community exists. They live in a small, spartan apartment that they live in for two years before moving to the nearby Paseo

Colon. After Maxi and Yankel arrive in San Jose, Maxi is sitting in a cafeteria when the President, Pepe Figueres Ferrer sits at the table next to his, without a bodyguard in sight. This drives home how different Costa Rica is. Abraham buys a general retail store that he renames Comercial Leo after Chana's son. The business makes just enough money to get by and to send Maxi to Mexico to study medicine. Just before Maxi finishes his training he marries Irene Rubinstein.

After seven years the brothers decide to retire and sold the business. A few months later they realize retirement is not all it's cracked up to be and bought another store, calling it Comercial Leo, again. This time they focus on shoes. This time they experience better success and saved money to buy a house. Chana and her family move to San Jose to help out, as her parents age.

In 1983, Frieda becomes severely ill with an extremely rare lung disease. Maxi is able to get her to the US National Institute of Health where she is treated by Dr. Anthony Fauci over a period of six years before being declared disease-free.

Whilst Frieda was ill the two brothers are attacked in their business. The two attackers flee, one with injuries to his head. Maxi is working at the San Juan de Dios hospital and tracks down the offender who has gone to that hospital for treatment. When the trail arrives Yankel reversed his testimony and the man is set free.

In 1990, Abraham's eldest grandson Leo is in Israel and Abraham decides it is the perfect time to visit along with Yankel and Frieda.

In 1995, they finally decide that they should retire a second time. Chana persuades Abraham to buy a house. So he buys one with a garden in a nice neighborhood with plenty of parks, in one of which Yankel practices Tai-chi with a group of Chinese gentlemen every day.

Abraham decides he wants to make one last trip back to Poland but Yankel and Frieda do not accompany him. Instead, he takes Chana, Maxi, and Irene. On the trip, he recounts his survivor's guilt and his questioning of God. The party visits the town of Tykocin to discover that the synagogue has been turned into a Jewish museum. The next day they go to Treblinka which he finds quite distressing. He ends up screaming to his dead mother, then introduces his family to her. He prays the Kaddish. That night they were all too agitated to sleep without sleeping pills. He falls out of bed and injures his head; Maxi treated him.

On the third day, they visit Garwolin but have a hard time locating the cemetery where his father lies buried. Eventually, they are guided to the correct location but it is now a thicket. They look for his grave without success. Again, he prays the Kaddish. Then they head into Parysow where they search for the house he grew up in. An old man helps them locate it.

They met up with the Paliski family, his granddaughter who lives in Warsaw, and her father who accompanies the party on a visit to Paliski's old house. They then set off to locate Bolek's house and the stables where they were so nearly captured, and in the process meet his granddaughter and are taken to meet her aunt Janina, Bolek's daughter.

The next day they visit the remains of the Warsaw ghetto and attend the synagogue where they a bar mitzvah. Finally, on the last day of the trip, they go to Cracow and attend the evening Sabbath service.

Now 101, Yankel's end day draws near. Abraham pleads that he holds on a little longer which he does for a couple of months. Abraham's health is also deteriorating, having had a pacemaker fitted and suffering from diabetes shortness of breath, and using a wheelchair. He continues to question God, asking the questions to Rabbi Miletski. Abraham is now confined to the house and its garden where he is surrounded by the birds he feeds. As he deteriorates further, a hospital bed is set up on the ground floor of the house, he is constantly on oxygen and he tells Maxi that he thinks he has three days to live. On Friday night he is sitting at the dining table with the Shabbat surrounded by his family. He is served whiskey and as he tries to lift the glass says "Lechaim. Lechaim". He passes away the following morning and is buried that Sunday.

Author Bios:

Max Gutreiman Goldberg was born in La Paz, Bolivia in 1955. He currently lives in San José, Costa Rica where he practices as a Medical Internist.

Chana Gutreiman Goldberg was born in Munich, Germany in 1949. She is a sociologist, having worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. She currently lives in San José, Costa Rica where cares for her mother Frieda.

Mauricio Vargas Ortega, born in Santa Ana, Costa Rica in 1971, is a writer, researcher, and professor. As the co-author of this book, his task was to give a literary structure to the faithful transcriptions of the life stories of Abraham Gutreiman.

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