of Hanover, almost 800 prisoners, men and women, fell on the night of April 8–9, 1945. Many railway wagons transporting prisoners were bombed from the air, and hundreds of them burned to death.

In March 1945, Himmler, just about to be fired from his post by Hitler, had ordered that the Jewish prisoners be treated like all the others and their death rates reduced, as part of his frantic efforts to reach some arrangement with the Allies.

BY THAT point, the Allies were closing for the kill, as the German troops were already battle-weary. Many deserted their units, even if they would be hanged on the spot when apprehended.

On March 18, 1945, German armaments minister Speer told Hitler openly that the economy would collapse within few weeks. Hitler, who had once said that Germany would either be victorious or cease to exist, convinced Speer that “if the war is lost, then the people is lost, this fate is irreversible, what will remain will be only the infernal ones.”

He ordered Speer to implement the “scorched earth policy,” to destroy the Saar mines, all factories, railways, bridges, electric and water installations. Speer – who, despite the steadily growing chaos, had succeeded in keeping the German war machine going – refused to implement his boss’s recommendations and saved what he could.

In April 1945, more and more Germans were asking why the Allies’ landings had not been stopped. They aimed their criticism at Hitler himself, even if people did not mention him directly. But the presence of the eight million Nazi Party members, one-10th of the population, still held back the critics.

Hitler was already a sick man, playing for himself the role of a hero in a Wagenerian drama. Compounding his guilt was a series of tragic strategic military decisions he made. He refused to agree to orderly withdrawals, and in sudden bouts of anger dismissed reliable officials and appointed party hacks. Mostly he lived in his own dreamworld.

Kershaw succeeds in presenting this great drama of Nazi Germany’s last hours in vivid and exciting colors. He writes with gusto and depth. However, I would like to hear more about the Nazi attempts, during the last months of the regime, to cover up their crimes by burning and burning the bodies of their victims and preparing to deny the Holocaust.

Still, I would strongly recommend this book to all students of human affairs, for Kershaw shows us how human folly can suffer the consequences and reveals the senselessness of tyranny and war as factors in human relations.

Non-fiction: A fictional account

Shalom Auslander’s new novel – which some will consider an insult to the memory of Holocaust victims – is an exploration of one man’s irrational determination to protect his family against genocide

halom Auslander’s new novel begins with Solomon Kugel, an inveterate “starter-awew,” his wife, Bree, and their young son Jonah, moving into an old farmhouse in Stockton, New York, a sleepy rural village where nothing significant has ever happened. Kugel should be happy. But he isn’t. Prone to existential angst, so desperate for things to turn out well that he always anticipates disaster, Kugel finds lots to worry about. An arsonist is on the loose, burning down farmhouses like the one he has just purchased. Against Bree’s wishes, his terminally ill mother, a native New Yorker who is convinced that she survived the concentration camps, has joined the household. And Kugel is about to discover that Anne Frank is living in his attic, working on a sequel to her diary.

Some, no doubt, will find Auslander’s subject, and his recurring jokes about lampshades, an insult to the memory of victims of Nazi atrocities. Nonetheless, it seems to me, Hope: A Tragedy, is, at its best, a provocative, perverse, wickedly funny and at times moving meditation on rationality, faith, the aspirations, anger, anxiety, and self-absorption of middle-class Americans, and the lessons and limitations of history.

Desperate to protect his family from illness, insult, indifference and violence, Kugel consults a therapist, Professor Jove, “the distillation of all Western and Eastern thought of the past two thousand years combined.” The antithesis of Voltaire’s Doctor Pangloss, Jove believes that hope is the greatest source of misery in the world, setting us up for one dispiriting disaster after another. In its own way, he claims, Hitler’s Final Solution was optimistic, as was “the ludicrous dictum to which it gave birth: Never Again.” When anyone promises progress and an end to pain, Jove advises, “Run. Hide. Pessimists don’t build gas chambers.”

Even more rattled than before, Kugel now fears that evil might or might not now reside in the backyard, but “the motherf**ker” is out there, 24/7. With his sensitive stomach, he knows he could never survive a genocide: “I wouldn’t even make it to hanging by the neck in the shower,” Kugel ponder whether a loving father should drop his baby on his “delicate eggshell skull” – or sit his young child in front of the TV set and turn him “into spongy, uncomprehending, witless mush.” Obsessed with last words and gravestone epitaphs, he thinks “Life: Examine at Your Own Risk” is not all that bad.

However, Kugel is not nearly that cynical. And neither is Shalom Auslander. Although Kugel remains far from Solomonic, Auslander will allow him to sense that human beings can – and should – go about their business without worrying every waking moment about the storm to come. And that there is good reason to believe that life with Jonah and Bree and chocolate ice cream can be enjoyed.

Kugel resolves to have a “Big Talk” with his son – and introduce him to Anne Frank. “It ain’t the best world, kid,” he will tell him, “but it ain’t the worst. Maybe Godot shows up in act three; maybe the audience is just leaving too early.”

Hope: A Tragedy does not end on this faith-based sentiment, of course. Kugel will reach out for “help, for saving” to a man who might be Professor Jove or his mother’s hero, Harvard lawyer Alan Dershowitz, or neither of them. And Auslander will give the last words to a minor character, well qualified to issue a reminder that since reality is a “nightmare,” most of us will “crack and crumble” when confronted with “hideous, horrible non-fiction” accounts of human existence. And then, for better and worse, they will allow fiction back into their consciousness because the alternative, all by itself, is “too damned much to bear.”

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