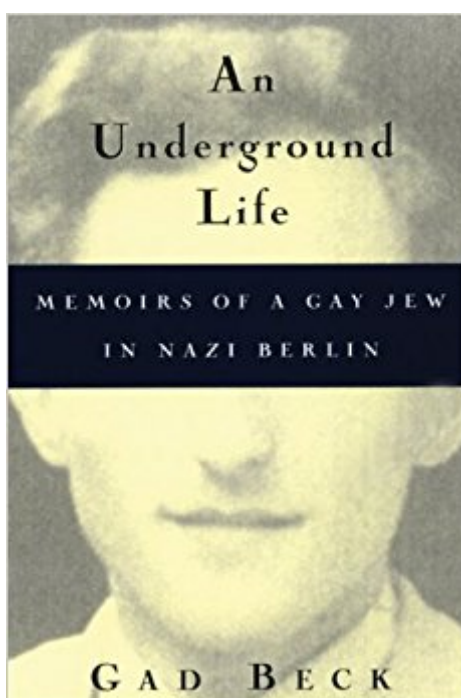


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# An Underground Life: Memoirs Of A Gay Jew In Nazi Berlin (Living Out: Gay And Lesbian Autobiog)



## Synopsis

That a Jew living in Nazi Berlin survived the Holocaust at all is surprising. That he was a homosexual and a teenage leader in the resistance and yet survived is amazing. But that he endured the ongoing horror with an open heart, with love and without vitriol, and has written about it so beautifully is truly miraculous. This is Gad Beck's story.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The publication of Richard Plant's *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (1986) opened public discussion of the treatment of gay people under the Third Reich. Since then, few books have revealed the personal stories of those who endured anti-gay German policies (I, Pierre Seel, *Deported Homosexual*, 1995, is a notable exception), perhaps because many of the gay men who survived are now dead, or never felt safe coming out even after the war. All of this makes Beck's startling memoir a particularly important addition to both gay and Holocaust studies. Born in 1923 to a Jewish father and a Christian mother in a middle-class family, Beck was raised in both of his parents' religious traditions. When anti-Jewish policies involving housing relocation, forced labor and, finally, transport to the camps began to be enforced, Beck helped set up resistance efforts to hide refugees and smuggle food and drugs into labor and concentration camps. In one terrifying episode, he donned a Hitler Youth uniform to rescue a lover from a deportation camp. Actively homosexual from an early age, Beck argues forthrightly and convincingly that his sexuality and love for men which he movingly describes over the course of many adventures infused most of his life

and gave him the ability to fight for his own life and for others. His astute observations of daily life in Nazi Berlin, related in a chatty, humorous style, present a full, complex portrait of the times. (Oct.)  
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Beck, director of Berlin's Jewish Adult Education Center, recalls his youth and his work in the anti-Nazi resistance under most unusual circumstances. Beck was half of a pair of twins (with his sister Margot) born to an interfaith couple in Weimar Germany. Beck was one of those rare fortunate gay men who recognized his sexual orientation while still very young and who had a tolerant, loving, and supportive family who never for an instant were troubled by his lifestyle. He was equally lucky that his kin on the Christian side of the family felt the same toward their new Jewish relatives. Those facts are an inextricable element in his story of growing up Jewish in Nazi Germany. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Beck and his family found themselves, like other Jews, almost immediately stigmatized by law and separated forcibly from their non-Jewish friends and neighbors. After a lengthy series of humiliations, he was forced to leave his nondenominational school for a Jewish one. Beck is one of those quietly feisty types who are spurred by rejection into action; plunged into an entirely Jewish milieu, he quickly embraced the Zionist movement. Just as quickly, he embraced many of its male adherents, and the author is charmingly frank (but not explicit) about his sex life as well as his clandestine political activities. He would survive the war living as an "illegal" in Berlin, becoming a central figure in the underdocumented Zionist resistance that functioned despite the Nazis. Beck is a witty, chatty figure, and Heibert and Brown have done a splendid job of capturing and conveying his voice. The result is a readable and entertaining memoir of a terrible time. Beck is apparently at work on a sequel that takes him from the end of the war up to the present; its a book to look forward to. -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin is a relatively quick read, but there are so many names that sometimes it's hard to keep track of who is who, the only drawback I saw in the memoir (a glossary of names would have been helpful). The memoir starts with the period before the war and deals with the rise of the Nazis, followed by the the massive deportations of Jews to the camps. However, there were still quite a few Jews living in Berlin (about 6000-8000 of the 160,000 who resided there in 1933) through the course of the war. Many were in hiding, some were "passing" and had fake credentials, and many others were "mischlings," such as Beck himself (half Jew/half Aryan), who officially could be deported to the camps but who often did slave labor in Berlin as part of the Nazi war effort instead (as Beck did, although his luck finally ran out and he ended up

in a pre-deportation center because of his involvement in the Jewish Resistance movement, but it was right at the time that the war was ending, so he didn't get deported after all (by the skin of his teeth). These remaining Jews in Berlin were often helped by cAryans (Aryans who "cared" for them either because they were making money off of them or because they were really good Christian people). It was amazing how many sexual encounters Gad had with younger gay and straight Jews alike. The straight Jews often thought their days were numbered and wanted intimacy, even it was with their own sex, before being sent off to the camps. These sexual encounters were often quite passionate and not of the "wham bam" variety, involving a great deal of all-night cuddling while the men slept together in a mutual hiding place. These encounters were usually of the "finding a port in the storm" variety. In some cases, these relationships actually lasted for several months. Beck is not a physical wonder by any means; he's just a good, positive, shrewd, and incredibly brave person who never let fear keep him from doing what was needed to help his Jewish brothers and sisters. I think he is a real hero, not just for gay people but for all Jews as well. His daily encounters with death and tragedy, from which he often barely escaped, kept me turning those pages. The memoir ends with the end of the war. In 1947, Beck went Israel and settled down with a partner he meets there, while continuing to be involved in Jewish emigration to Israel. He returned to Berlin in the 1970s and died in Berlin in 2012 at the age of 88.

I was disappointed that this story wasn't better told. Some of the reviews, I think, conflate Mr. Beck's obvious and commendable daring and intelligence with good writing. The book is told in an obvious 'this happened, then this happened, then this happened' format with no attempt to be more creative or artful in the narrating. Little is provided in the way of context or explanation. Given the fact that "Memoirs of a Gay Jew" is the subtitle, there is precious little information about wartime gay life and, in fact, the random "...and then I slept with a beautiful man I saw across the courtyard" comes across as gratuitous and irrelevant. Further, Mr. Beck packs in an unnecessary, endless string of names that makes keeping track of all the players virtually impossible. And frankly, there is almost nothing actually explaining the details of life as an illegal under the Nazis. Not to detract from Mr. Beck's importance in helping many Jews survive in Hitler's Berlin, but I was hoping for much more from this book. A more active professional co-author, or a good editor, could have benefited this work greatly, because it could be a really compelling work.

This is one of the few books from college that I kept. I read it for a class titled The History of Sex in Modern Europe. In this book, I cried, I laughed, and yelled out loud at the antagonists. It's definitely

worth the read and provides a totally different insight to the Holocaust.

Very well written memoir of yet another minority whom the Nazis tried to wipe out

This book is a cross between a coming-of-age tale and a historical text about Nazi Germany. It is powerful, at times difficult to read, and very surprising. The author's unrelenting optimism, charisma, and passion for life and a sense of community pervade this work and make it an inspiring read.

It is unusual to find a holocaust memoir that is upbeat. It seems that a key to his survival was his optimism. Beck describes his life in Berlin and adventures as an underground leader who was helping other young Jews survive in hiding. The story is wrenching. It also is interesting to read his several references to various assistance offered to him and to others by non-Jews. The tales of the small clubs and associations of those in hiding were most interesting. It was a surprise to read his personal anecdotes as well as stories of others who experienced love or amorous relationships even during the holocaust. Life must go on. Ultimately, it really provokes the reader to wonder how some human beings are so cruel to others, and how such cruelty or prejudice exists throughout the world even today.

Incredible story!! Shows yet another complex and dangerous in the heart of Nazi territory. Gad Beck is no less a young hero and an inspiration for positive action in the face of despair and never losing sight of love...

a good view into the inner German community under Nazis.

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