



An Interview with Annette Libeskind Berkovits

1. **Why did you choose a corset maker as a protagonist of a historical novel that deals with some of the bloodiest events of the twentieth century?**

It seemed to me that precisely because a woman who spends time designing undergarments would probably be an excellent example of a woman *furthest* away from violence. But that's not how real life happens. Life takes people into directions they'd have never imagined. The corset maker in my novel was inspired by my mother and her three friends who themselves experienced the brutality of the times from the 1930s to the end of WWII and beyond. These were women who found incredible courage under impossible circumstances. I hope that my protagonist can inspire young women of today who often see violence in the media and have no idea how they would react if faced with a real life circumstance of theirs, or their loved ones lives in danger.

2. **Most historical novels of that period deal with one huge event—say WWII alone is enough of a subject for many books—yet you've woven together not one, not two, but three or more violent events: pre-WWII antisemitic attacks on Jews; the Arab—Jewish conflict in Palestine; the Spanish Civil War and WWII in Southern France. Why include all of these?**

Well..it is as you say ambitious, but for some women, the events of the twentieth century, one of the bloodiest in history, actually threw them into such events in a serial manner. This was the case with the women who inspired the novel. My own mother for example escaped the antisemitism in Poland to find herself in the midst of the Arab revolt in Palestine, then found herself at the outbreak of WWII in Warsaw, Poland on September 1, 1939 and after she escaped that hell, she wound up in a brutal Soviet gulag in Siberia. I was interested in exploring what inner resources keep such women going, what gave them strength to survive. I also wanted to spotlight how young women, in particular, can sometimes make spur of the moment decisions that can alter the course of their entire lives.



3. What about the male characters in your novel? How did you happen to invent them?

I started with a very young, curious protagonist and I knew that her insular religious community wouldn't be enough for her, especially not after she enrolled in a secular school at the behest of her grandmother who was a woman ahead of her times. I just knew that her hormones would begin to make an impact, so meeting a man—well, it had to happen. But how would she react to him? And what if he was a man of a very different social status, a Parisian Count, no less? That's the stuff of moving the plot forward. Of course in her long life there would be other men, for other reasons.

4. I found it interesting that you placed this young woman of orthodox Jewish upbringing in a monastery in Spain. Why there?

So this is a good example of how life can take someone to unplanned places. Readers will find out why and how Rifka got there and why she chose to devote a portion of her life to care for orphans. In some ways this experience was a foundation for her future growth as a woman. And in the monastery she tried to give the children the kind of education she wanted to have, but of course some of it had to be subversive. There was, in fact, a lot of tension during the Spanish Civil war between nuns who supported the democratically elected government on the Republican side and those who supported Franco's forces. He of course eventually won and became a dictator who ruled for thirty five years.

5. I understand that your protagonist struggled with some deeply held principles and had to make extremely difficult choices. Can you tell me more about those choices?

Without spoiling the plot, it's not easy to do. But I will say that after reading "All Quiet on the Western Front" in school, Rifka became very wary of violence in all forms. She thought human conflicts should be solvable by listening and discussion. It took some horrible events to get her to look at life differently. Though, I must say that in her heart of hearts, no matter her actions, Rifka never truly accepted violence as the solution.



6. **What about the other women who inspired this fascinating story?**

I cannot say too much about them without revealing some plot surprises, but one of them was, in fact, my mother's business partner. Another friend from my mother's teenage years in Warsaw went on to participate in the Spanish Civil War. And the third, a courageous, seemingly fearless woman, saved my mother's life in the Siberian gulag. I have made some of these real women into composite characters in the fictional account.