

An impressive historical novel

By Yehudit Collins

THE FIRST question a book reviewer needs to answer is: was it a good read, and did you enjoy it?

Yes, and yes. *The Wealthy: Chronicle of a Jewish Family* is a densely written book packed full of details that must have been intensively researched. I must also commend the translator. Without having read the original, I cannot vouch for the veracity of the English, but the language is so nuanced and precise that I can only assume that the translator has made a brilliant job of it.

The book is divided into three sections: Germany, England and The Land of Israel. Well, my folks came from Poland, close enough, ended up in England, which was my home for 43 years and now I live in Israel, so of course I was going to be interested. The background mirrors the background of many Ashkenazi Jews who left Europe seeking a better and freer life.

Over the years, the fictional family takes the same path that so many did in real life, from literally rags and life as a peddler, to middle-class respectability, to riches and entry into the upper classes, using education as a means of raising their status. During the transition, the family would become increasingly assimilated. But as so many found out in a very brutal way in Germany and in a more polite and refined way in England, a person may think of themselves as no longer Jewish, but to the residents of their host country – no matter how many years they have lived there and whatever public service they may have performed – they are and always will be the Jews, “the new people.”

The book is a work of historical fiction: a lot of facts with verified quotations made by actual historical characters, with the many fictional characters written in a very believable way; that had the fictional

character actually lived at that time and interacted with the genuine characters, they would have thought, spoken and acted as they do in the book.

But – and isn't there always a but? – I do feel that the book would have benefited immensely if an eagle-eyed editor had diligently exercised a blue pencil.

As a nine-year-old schoolgirl, I was given the usual end-of-term assignment to write “What I did on my holidays.” The teacher told us that she expected lots of descriptive passages, lots of detail.

For once it was an easy assignment. I wrote about being a bridesmaid at my brother's wedding. My dress was buttoned at the back with 26 buttons. Did you need to know that? Probably not. Possibly I needed to know that a character had a brown suit made for a particular event, but I did not need to know the details of the buttons on that suit.

While the presentation of a debutante at court is an integral part of the narrative, the precise measurements of the debutante's train and the embroidered design on her gown are not. And while discussing the options for the length and shape of the train, the sentence: “The rest you can read in Lady Colin Campbell's book, *Etiquette of Good Society*,” belongs in the notes, if anywhere. The wealth of detail, although interesting and informative, can at times overwhelm and slow down the actual story.

I am full of admiration for the tremendous amount of research that went into the writing of this book. It is packed with facts that are both interesting and informative, leaving you with that “Gosh, I didn't know that!” feeling, as if you are also studying while having a recreational read.

The third part of the book deals with the founding and subsequent establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Many of



The Wealthy
Chronicle of a Jewish Family (1763-1948)

Hamutal Bar Yosef

translated by Esther Cameron

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the quoted speeches are of public record. Much is made of the established wealthy and influential Jewish voices that were raised against the creation of a Jewish state. Then as now, Jews holding powerful positions fear the charge of dual loyalty should they show support for Israel.

Again true to real life, the younger generation finds in Israel a newfound pride in their origins. And although we are left with the thought that although they are in no way religious, one has the feeling that future generations might find their way back. A book that leaves you wanting to know: where are they now and what happened after?