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On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War

Bernard Wasserstein

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On the Eve is the portrait of a world on the brink of annihilation. In this provocative book, Bernard Wasserstein presents a new and disturbing interpretation of the collapse of European Jewish civilization even before the Nazi onslaught.

In the 1930s, as Europe spiraled toward the Second World War, the continent's Jews faced an existential crisis. The harsh realities of the age—anti-Semitic persecution, economic discrimination, and an ominous climate of violence—devastated Jewish communities and shattered the lives of individuals.

The Jewish crisis was as much the result of internal decay as of external attack. Demographic collapse, social disintegration, and cultural dissolution were all taking their toll. The problem was not just Nazism: In the summer of 1939 more Jews were behind barbed wire outside the Third Reich than within it, and not only in police states but even in the liberal democracies of the West. The greater part of Europe was being transformed into a giant concentration

camp for Jews. Unlike most previous accounts, *On the Eve* focuses not on the anti-Semites but on the Jews. Wasserstein refutes the common misconception that they were unaware of the gathering forces of their enemies. He demonstrates that there was a growing and widespread recognition among Jews that they stood on the edge of an abyss.

On the Eve recaptures the agonizing sorrows and the effervescent cultural glories of this last phase in the history of the European Jews. It explores their hopes, anxieties, and ambitions, their family ties, social relations, and intellectual creativity—everything that made life meaningful and bearable for them.

Wasserstein introduces a diverse array of characters: holy men and hucksters, beggars and bankers, politicians and poets, housewives and harlots, and, in an especially poignant chapter, children without a future. The geographical range also is vast: from Vilna (the "Jerusalem of the North") to Amsterdam, Vienna, Warsaw, and Paris, from the Judeo-Espagnol-speaking stevedores of Salonica to the Yiddish-language collective farms of Soviet Ukraine and Crimea.

Wasserstein's aim is to "breathe life into dry bones." Based on comprehensive research, rendered with compassion and empathy, and brought alive by telling anecdotes and dry wit, *On the Eve* offers a vivid and enlightening picture of the European Jews in their final hour.

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