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## Emil and Karl: A Novel

By Yankev Glatshetyn



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This is a unique work. It is one of the first books written for young readers describing the early days of the event that has since come to be known as the Holocaust. Originally written in Yiddish in 1938, it is one of the most accomplished works of children's literature in this language. It is also the only book for young readers by Glatshetyn, a major American Yiddish poet, novelist, and essayist.

Written in the form of a suspense novel, *Emil and Karl* draws readers into the dilemmas faced by two young boys--one Jewish, the other not--when they suddenly find themselves without families or homes in Vienna on the eve of World War II. Because the book was written before World War II, and before the full revelations of the Third Reich's persecution of Jews and other civilians, it offers a fascinating look at life during this period and the moral challenges people faced under Nazism. It is also a taut, gripping, page-turner of the first order.



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## **Emil and Karl: A Novel** By Yankev Glatshteyn Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

*Starred Review.* Grade 5-9—This novel about two boys growing up in pre-World War II Vienna provides a unique perspective. The author wrote the book after returning to America from a visit to Poland in 1934, and was alarmed at how growing Nazi persecution was changing the face of Europe. It was published in Yiddish in 1940. Emil and Karl are school friends. Emil is Jewish and has been forced from school. Although Karl is not Jewish, one day men drag his socialist mother away. He goes to find his friend only to discover that Emil's father has been murdered by the Nazis and that his mother has gone crazy with grief. The two boys are totally alone and must escape the omnipresent storm troopers and find food and shelter. They become both observers and victims of the attacks on Jews. Helped by resistance fighters, they eventually escape the city. This important book, newly translated into English, gives a chilling portrait of a world descending into madness as experienced by two innocent children. The excellent translation effectively conveys the helplessness of the characters. As terrifying as their experiences were, the story was written at a time when the full horrors perpetrated by Hitler were yet to occur. While Emil and Karl escaped, the majority of persecuted children did not. A useful comparison might be made to Hans Peter Richter's *Friedrich* (Puffin, 1987), which did not have such a positive outcome.—*Quinby Frank, formerly at Green Hedges School, Vienna, VA*

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From [Booklist](#)

*\*Starred Review\** *Emil and Karl* may be "one of the first books about the Holocaust for any age and in any language." So says Jeffrey Shandler, professor of Yiddish Literature and Holocaust Studies at Rutgers University, who has translated the book into English for the first time. The novel, written for children, was published in Yiddish in New York, appearing in February 1940. Its author, a Jewish immigrant from Poland who had written two adult novels, was part of a dynamic Yiddish-speaking community in New York. On a visit home to Poland in 1934, he witnessed growing discrimination against Jews, and he wanted American Jewish children to know about it. Now, long after, translator Shandler fills in what was happening when the book was first published. World War II had begun in 1939, but the U.S. was not yet part of it; Germany had invaded Austria; Jews were viciously persecuted and deported to concentration camps. But even Glatshteyn could not foresee the death camps and genocide that were coming. Why has his novel never been translated before? Beyond the amazing publication history, it's much more than a dutiful read. It's a clear, powerful novel that will bring today's readers very close to what it was like to be a child under Nazi occupation.

Told in the third-person from the alternating viewpoints of two friends in Vienna—Emil, who is Jewish, and Karl, who is not—the story begins with the classic nightmare scenario. Karl watches the Nazis drag his mother away; they punch him in the stomach and warn him that they will be back for him. He remembers when his Socialist father was shot dead. Karl tries to find shelter with his Jewish school friend, Emil, but after Nazis shoot Emil's father, the two boys are left on their own. They find kindness and shelter with a neighbor, with a brave member of the Underground, and even with a police supervisor; but they also find betrayal and vicious cruelty. They witness the destruction of Jewish stores, and, while being taunted by mobs, they are forced to scrub the city pavements with their hands. In an unforgettable ending, the two friends crowd onto trains, and they are separated. Will they be transported to a safe country or to concentration camps?

The fast-moving prose is stark and immediate. Glatshteyn was, of course, writing about what was happening to children in his time; his story was not historical fiction then. At times, the story reads like an adventure, but the harsh reality is always there, neither sensational nor sentimental. The translation, 65 years after the

novel's original publication, is nothing short of haunting.

*Hazel Rochman*

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## Review

“This important book...gives a chilling portrait of a world descending into madness as experienced by two innocent children. The excellent translation effectively conveys the helplessness of the characters.”—*School Library Journal*, Starred Review

“It’s a clear, powerful novel that will bring today’s readers very close to what it was like to be a child under Nazi occupation. . . . The fast-moving prose is stark and immediate. . . . The translation, sixty-five years after the novel’s original publication, is nothing short of haunting.”—*Booklist*, Starred Review

“Like ‘The Diary of Anne Frank,’ *Emil and Karl* will stir adults, as well as the book’s intended audience.”—*The New York Times*

“*Emil and Karl* defies categorization. For a moment I feel as if I am in Vienna in 1940, that I am standing beside the author, watching the impossible unfold. I share his disbelief, his mute acceptance of a world turned upside down. The experience is more immediate than mere fiction, more memorable and more frightening.”—Meg Rosoff, author of *How I Live Now*

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