Winner of the 2012 Jewish Journal Book Prize

What They Saved
Pieces of a Jewish Past
Nancy K. Miller

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Book Synopsis:
After her father’s death, Nancy K. Miller discovered a minuscule family archive: a handful of photographs, an unexplained land deed, a postcard from Argentina, unidentified locks of hair. These items had been passed down again and again, but what did they mean? Miller follows their traces from one distant relative to another, across the country, and across an ocean.

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Book Description

After her father’s death, Nancy K. Miller discovered a minuscule family archive: a handful of photographs, an unexplained land deed, a postcard from Argentina, unidentified locks of hair. These items had been passed down again and again, but what did they mean? Miller follows their traces from one distant relative to another, across the country, and across an ocean. Her story, unlike the many family memoirs focused on the Holocaust, takes us back earlier in history to the world of pogroms and mass emigrations at the turn of the twentieth century.

Searching for roots as a middle-aged orphan and an assimilated Jewish New Yorker, Miller finds herself asking unexpected questions: Why do I know so little about my family? How can I understand myself when I don’t know my past? The answers lead her to a carpenter in the Ukraine, a stationery peddler on the Lower East Side, and a gangster hanger-on in the Bronx. As a third-generation descendant of Eastern European Jews, Miller learns that the hidden lives of her ancestors reveal as much about the present as they do about the past. In the end, an odyssey to uncover the origins of her lost family becomes a memoir of renewal.

Pre-Publication Praise

“In this wry, original work of detective nonfiction, Miller conjures her long-missing family out of a handful of objects found in a drawer. As she tracks clues across continents and centuries, we savor the pleasures of the chase.”—Alix Kates Shulman, author of To Love What Is

“What They Saved is that rare memoir that manages to be intellectually stimulating and entertaining, heartbreaking and full of tender humor. Miller’s intimate family chronicle illuminates dark historical events to make a compelling story even more memorable.”—Lara Vapnyar, author of There Are Jews in My House

“A touching, dramatic chronicle of an attempt to resurrect, from heirlooms and hearsay, a vanished family. What They Saved—riveting, heartbreaking, and profound—suggests, in its tone, Sebald’s gravity and Ernaux’s candor. Reading Miller’s exquisite memoir, I learned how to pay attention, anew, to the allegorical solemnity of found objects.”—Wayne Koestenbaum, author of Andy Warhol

“From scraps and fragments of family memorabilia, Nancy K. Miller embarks on a riveting quest exploring the perplexing silences and astonishing resources of Jewish immigrants from turn-of-the-century Russia. A suspenseful, poignant, and ardent triumph of sleuth-work.”—Susan Gubar, author of Judas: A Biography

Post-Publication Praise

Please visit this book’s web page (http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/What-They-Saved,674867.aspx) for the most current post-publication praise.
Author Biography

Nancy K. Miller is distinguished professor of English and comparative literature at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is the author or editor of more than a dozen books, most recently *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* and *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death*.

Photo by Marcia Ciriello Photography

Additional Information

Events
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