

Book Review: *Eli's Promise*

by Hon. Michael Jordan

Eli's Promise, a novel by Ronald H. Balson, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2020, 343 pages. ISBN 978-1-250-27146-4 (hardcover) and ISBN 978-1-250-27147-1 (ebook)

Ronald H. Balson, the author of bestsellers and well written novels *The Girl from Berlin*, *Once We Were Brothers*, *Saving Sophie*, and *Karolina's Twins*, is a Chicago trial and appellate lawyer with the Chicago law firm of Stone Poggrund & Korey.

Eli's Promise starts in Berlin at the close of World War II and moves back to Poland during the war years. It then progresses to the Albany Park neighborhood in Chicago in the 1960s after proceeding to a displaced persons' camp in Germany at the end of the war. The action moves from place to place and time period to time period in a seamless manner recounting events involving Eli Rosen, the protagonist-hero and his family as well as the cunning Nazi collaborator Maximilian (Max) Poleski. The author, Ronald Balson, is true to his pattern set in all his past pieces of historical fiction of sticking to the historical facts regarding dates, places, and personalities. When it gets down to the Rosen family, friends, and townspeople in each of the settings he creates personalities that are so real you develop an attachment to them all. Many of the named Nazis are actual people and the acts described by them are unfortunately true.

We experience the life of terror surrounding Eli, his wife Esther, her sister, his 5-year old son, Izaak, his father, his brother, and sister-in-law as the vise of oppression closes in on them as the Nazi oppression spreads over Europe and takes over their previously middleclass comfortable lives. Eli followed his father into the construction business and his organizing skills are quickly recognized by the oppressive Jew-hating conquerors. He and his family are separated and he must find a way to reunite them again before any are destroyed. Also, he has made a promise – as much to himself and G-d as to anyone else. He must find justice and hold Poleski accountable before he dies.

Many surprising twists and turns occur throughout the book and while none are expected, all are reasonable. The reader never really knows the next hurdle and danger or the next friend and ally participating in the events. We see in the midst of hardship and brutality that there are people with hearts filled with kindness. It takes a lot of cunning and understanding to discern the friends from those who are dangers to survival. The search for Poleski and the fulfillment of Eli's promise is nothing short of a long-lasting resolving mystery – not a who done it always, but whether the villain is still around and available to be dealt his justice. Good people are at risk and harm to them is greatly felt by the reader. Upon finishing the book, I felt a loss. I missed so many of the characters that I had become attached to after only the first paragraphs in the book. Some of the themes in the story about isolation, degradation, and exclusion are current themes confronting our society today. We may wonder how survivors could not get into most of the countries of the world including and perhaps especially the United States due to anti-Semitism and hate of any foreigners. In the 30s and 40s and now, many Americans feel others are a drain and not really contributors to our society. Fortunately, there are some who have during the past and currently tried to set a path of acceptance to those in need without a safe place to go back to live. Tuberculosis and its required precautions in the 40s and 50s to avoid contagion were so much like our current COVID concerns regarding hand washing and mask wearing and isolation now referred to as social distancing. Precautions were not political then as some have made them now. We see characters we endear suffer from TB as they might today from COVID with medical advice urging isolation, masking and washing.

Eli's Promise is a fast read. It is hard to put the book down since it grips you as much as you hold onto the book to turn the page. Balson has constructed another best seller and like his past works, one that may also win critical acclaim as well. History is much more meaningful when seen through the eyes of realistic characters having substance in a historical novel.

Robert H. Balson certainly paints a realistic picture with words conveying all the emotions that one could experience without actually being present as the events play out. Without revealing the resolution of the mysteries contained in this novel, I will say that although the author claims no connection to real people except for the Nazis, I thought I recognized a prominent figure from Chicago as I read the story. I strongly suggest that you read the book and decide for yourself.

The Hon. Michael S. Jordan served as a judge in the Circuit Court of Cook County from 1974 to 1999 and then began a private mediation and arbitration practice that continues today (Mediation & Arbitration Services, Glenview, Illinois, 847-724-3502). He has been a member of the Decalogue Society of Lawyers since 1975, previously served on the Decalogue Board, and has lectured on various subjects for the CLE program.