

In the Aftermath of Genocide Jews and Cambodians connect in recent literature

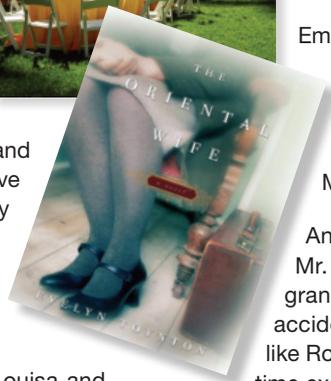
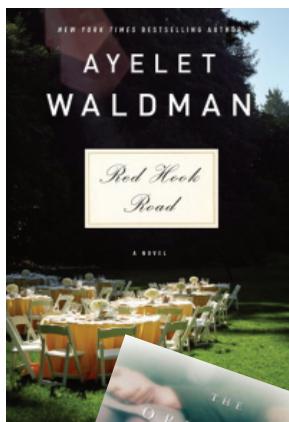
Two recent novels chronicle the stories of Jews who escaped Europe before Kristallnacht, Americanized in an attempt to leave their past behind and built successful careers in the United States. Later in their lives, they were closely connected with Cambodians who too escaped death in the years of terror under the Khmer Rouge, whose reign resulted in the death of approximately two million of their fellow countrymen.

Evelyn Toynton's novel, *The Oriental Wife* (Other Press, 2011) is about the attempt to leave the horrors of the past behind. It tells the story of three childhood friends in pre-WWII Nuremberg: Rolf, his best friend Otto, and Otto's cousin Louisa. The three manage to leave Germany before Hitler takes power, eventually all landing in New York. Rolf has always had a thing for Louisa, but wasn't brought up to express his emotions, so he keeps his feelings about Louisa to himself.

Finally one night Rolf professes his love for Louisa and becomes a doting boyfriend, fiancé, and husband. He works tirelessly to help Jews back in Germany escape. Without telling Louisa, he pulls strings so her parents can leave Germany. His own father isn't so lucky, nor is Otto's. Despite it all, Rolf and Louisa look to the future and hope to leave their past behind. When Louisa learns she's pregnant, the couple celebrates and plans for the day when their family will grow.

But a terrible accident strikes just as Louisa delivers a healthy baby girl. Louisa is physically debilitated and Rolf can't bear to look at his once glamorous wife. Louisa turns inward, ashamed at her new inability to perform routine activities like cutting her own food. Rolf all but ignores his wife and doesn't protest when she volunteers to move into a house for invalids. He divorces her soon after.

Rolf and Louisa's daughter, Emma, grows into an intelligent young woman who visits her mother every week at the home for invalids. After finding a job in the mid-1970s with a small publisher that works with Cambodian authors, Emma becomes touched by the atrocities in Cambodia. Her boss, a Cambodian émigré, shows a liking to Emma and the two begin an affair that suddenly ends one day when her boss leaves New York without warning. Emma learns that he returns to



Paris, where he'd studied at the Sorbonne, for all the reasons her father should have stuck with Louisa.

Like *The Oriental Wife*, Ayelet Waldman's latest novel, *Red Hook Road* (Random House, 2011), also addresses a relationship between a Jew who narrowly escaped Europe and a Cambodian whose parents survived Pol Pot's Killing Fields. Waldman's characters form a different kind of bond, one more like grandfather and granddaughter who connect through music and the pasts they escaped.

Emil Kimmelbrod is a world-famous violinist who teaches at Julliard during the academic year and spends his summers at a music institute in Maine. Thanks to his strict German-Czech heritage, he prefers his family to address him as Mr. Kimmelbrod.

And similar to *The Oriental Wife*, tragedy strikes Mr. Kimmelbrod's family one early July day when his granddaughter and her new husband are killed in a car accident only an hour after their wedding ceremony. And like Rolf in *The Oriental Wife*, Mr. Kimmelbrod has a hard time expressing his feelings over his loss and the pain his daughter Iris experiences at the death of her oldest child.

But that's where the strong German Jewish characters in these stories diverge. Samantha is the daughter of the deceased groom's relative. A shy pre-teen, adopted as a toddler from Cambodia, Samantha shows an early interest in the violin, which doesn't go unnoticed by Mr. Kimmelbrod. He teaches Samantha in the summer, but when Kimmelbrod returns to New York for the winter, he arranges for another teacher to instruct Samantha in Maine.

As the years pass and Samantha's violin abilities advance, Mr. Kimmelbrod and his daughter Iris receive permission from Samantha's mother to allow the teen to live with them in New York and study violin full-time there.

By the end of the book, Mr. Kimmelbrod can finally feel the emotions — through Samantha's music — that he's suppressed for decades. While Samantha's background is never fully spelled out — something her adopted mother probably never learned in full — it's assumed that Mr. Kimmelbrod feels somewhat of an allegiance with his student as much for her musical abilities as for her background as a child who escaped a land of genocide. ♪