

'Hannah's War' on the Upper East Side

by Phyllis Chesler



The soft rain did not stop the glamorous Book Club women from crowding into my very charming neighborhood bookshop—The Corner Bookstore. We were there to hear Jan Eliasberg, the movie and television director (NCIS: LOS ANGELES, MIAMI VICE, BLUE BLOODS), read from *Hannah's War*, her first novel.

Eliasberg did a brief reading and then engaged in a spirited QNA with her Little, Brown editor, Judy Clain (*Julie and*

Julia, I Am Malala). Eliasberg told us how and why she started researching this book. One day, in the New York Public Library, she suddenly wondered how the *New York Times* had handled America's dropping of the the H-bomb on Hiroshima. The coverage included a rather strange phrase, namely, that a "non-Aryan woman" had worked on the science behind the bomb. Who was this unnamed woman?

Eliasberg was hooked.

Hannah's War is a fictionalized tale based on the life and work of Lise Meitner, the Austrian Jew and genius-level theoretical and nuclear physicist—the woman who discovered nuclear fission, who was never properly credited in her time, and who has been all but forgotten in ours.

Now, here, that "non-Aryan" woman scientist is resurrected, reimagined into being. Meitner is yet another Rosalind Franklin or Rita Levi-Montalcini—all supremely talented Jewish women scientists who were barely given salaries, or proper equipment, or the room in which to work. For a time, during World War Two, Turin-born Montalcini-Levi had to work at home in her bedroom.

In Berlin, before the War, Meitner had to work in a former carpenter's closet in the basement and use a bathroom down the street in a restaurant. British-born Rosalind Franklin died before she was forty and her work was the basis for Crick and Watson's discovery of the double helix and for which they, not she, received a Nobel Prize. Only Levi-Montalcini received that award for her discoveries in cell biology.

I am happily in the midst of reading the book. From what Eliasberg said, I gather that she's placed Hannah/Lise in Los Alamos, working on the Manhattan Project—something entirely fictional. But this is a novel, and novelists have the right to turn mere reality right on its's head, to imagine... anything.

Happy First Novel, Jan.