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Books

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A partisan view

by [Mark Bauerlein](#)

On *Full Circle: A Memoir*, by Edith Kurzweil.

Edith Kurzweil

Full Circle: A Memoir.

Transaction, 287 pages, \$49.95

On a gray Vienna afternoon in November 1938, thirteen-year-old Edith Weisz heard a commotion in the street below the family apartment. Eight months before, “miles and miles” of s.s. troops and brownshirts had marched down the avenue tossing brisk salutes as airplanes dropped pamphlets asking Austrians to welcome Hitler as he decreed the annexation of their nation. One day after Austria’s chancellor had resigned, Edith’s mother learned that their brand-new Ford had been requisitioned, and soon her father, a marble and stone merchant, landed in jail when a rival swore out a warrant against him for “unfair competition.” He won his release by selling his business for a pittance and leaving the country (the option was Dachau).

Earlier, when the troops first marched in, Edith “wished to be one of the children hopping and singing alongside.” This time, though, the invaders weren’t pacing in rank and asking for welcome. Instead, “hordes of stomping, pink-cheeked stormtroopers in brown and black-clad s.s. men—along with ordinary Viennese—were throwing Torah scrolls, bibles, and other holy articles into the street.” *Kristallnacht* had begun.

The episode opens *Full Circle*, an engaging personal memoir by Edith Kurzweil, a scholar of French thought and psychoanalysis, professor of sociology, and the last editor of *Partisan Review*. Eighty-five pages of flight follow as Edith and her younger brother enter Belgium as child refugees, cross into France when Belgium falls to Hitler, then pass through Spain and Portugal to board a transport to New York City where their parents await—a journey that sets the small, pitiful tale of two scrambling children against the descent of Europe into horror. The pattern holds throughout. Kurzweil’s story proceeds in intimate episodes, chronicling her troubled relations with parents, three husbands, life in Italy with capitalists and in New York with intellectuals, and one parting after another. At the same time, momentous and evocative historical phenomena pass in and out in small but illuminating ways.

These tantalizing occasions of history are brief, though, and Kurzweil largely keeps the account personal. She presided over *Partisan Review* in its final years, but she has little to say about its impact in the 1980s and 1990s, the fates of the New York Intellectuals don’t enter the story, and the rise of political correctness in the academy appears only in quick vignettes. During one faculty gathering, Noam Chomsky tells colleagues “to encourage students to protest—even to the point of

laying down on a railway track while awaiting an oncoming train,” but Kurzweil has no further comment on the irresponsibility of the man and his fans. At the New School, professors agree to let student radicals take the first ten minutes of class time to preach that “capitalism had to be brought down,” and Kurzweil’s only judgment is that she “was pleased that they trusted me even though I was over thirty.” When William Phillips talks about his “terrible time” with the communists, she has him speak for just a few sentences before noting that “we switched the conversation to my need for a job.”

This would be a failing in the book were it not for that fact that the stories of *Partisan Review*, the New York Intellectuals, and political correctness have been so often told. Most readers of Kurzweil’s book already know enough details of each. All we need to hear of a visit by Simone de Beauvoir to New York in 1947 is her stated assurance that “imperialist America was in its death throes”—nothing more. Kurzweil remembers inviting Saul Bellow to deliver a talk, and when English professors aren’t invited to a small dinner, they boycott the event—a fit of pique familiar to anybody with a year of campus experience. No more explanation is necessary.

The value of this background knowledge perhaps limits the audience for the memoir, but it adds an effective tension to it as well. We have the political history, she supplies a personal history. Kurzweil experiences the Second World War, the Cold War, and the Culture Wars, but what counts here is their effect on an individual existence. She writes skillfully enough to keep the personal story intriguing. However interesting the political moments, the most powerful images in *Full Circle* emerge from her own life, as with a final declaration after one more death:

On that balmy Sunday, William was laid to rest in my plot in Westchester Hills Cemetery—two graves away from Robert [her second husband]. When will I be buried between them?

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