

# I once was a human being.

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**With *Goede mensen*, the young Israeli author Nir Baram has written about the terrors of living under the regimes of Stalin and Hitler. It is done so majestically that it reaches the same level as books by Varlam Shalamov and Vasili Grossman.**

The world of literature has been enriched by a great novel. Its author lives in Israel, was born in 1976, is called Nir Baram and he can instantly call himself a worthy successor of his famous literary compatriots Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua. *Goede mensen*, the novel that I am referring to and with which Baram makes his successful entrance in The Netherlands, is his fourth novel. The book is so poignant, realistic and beautiful, that, once you have finished it, it will keep on resonating and all standard attitudes towards what is right and what is wrong will have become clichés.

With *Goede mensen*, Baram is the first modern Israeli author to write a book about the ‘perpetrators’ in Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia. These ‘perpetrators’ are two normal people who, without explicitly wanting to, become accessory to the state terror in their countries and who will eventually suffer heavily from remorse.

It is a theme riddled with pitfalls, where there is a genuine danger that the literary aspect will be pushed aside by the historical details and in which the author can enter a minefield of moral clichés. It is for that reason that only eyewitness reports by Kertész, Curzio Malaparte, Varlam Shalamov or Vasili Grossman have succeeded in turning the evils under the regimes of Hitler and Stalin into literature. Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* is a rare exception, but Nir Baram has now surpassed him.

I often thought of Vasili Grossman’s magisterial war novel *Life and Fate* whilst reading *Goede mensen*. It has the same oppressive atmosphere of betrayal and impending doom, a similar variation of chapters set in the

Third Reich and in Stalin's Soviet Union. And the book causes a similar frightening realization that this has to be the way it was. And this is the reason why you constantly wonder how you yourself would have behaved under these circumstances, where many people were mostly trying to stay alive.

In his acknowledgements, Nir Baram states that he received advice from a number of experts on Germany and Russia and that he has seen the cities in which the novel is set. From the very beginning of the novel you experience that time's world in decline and you are a literary eyewitness to the horrors that were committed. You can almost see the smoke rise up from the burning synagogues during Kristallnacht, you can hear the shouts from the plundering SA soldiers, you can see the blood on the boots of the SS-ers who are acting like animals in the ghetto of Lublin, you can smell the scent of cabbage in the Leningrad apartments, and you wish to hide from the machine guns being fired from a Messerschmitt in Brest. Because of these characteristics, *Goede mensen* is a fascinating read from start to finish.

Baram, who seems to have a vast knowledge of German and Russian literature, starts out on an unsuspecting tone in Berlin on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November, 1938, mere hours before the beginning of the Kristallnacht. Then he takes you, for more than 500 pages, by way of spooky Leningrad of the year of death 1938 and via Nazi-occupied Poland, to Brest during the German attack of the Soviet Union on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, 1941. In Brest, the two worlds and protagonists come together. This is where the eventual *Götterdämmerung* will take place, which in gruesomeness can measure up to Grossman's descriptions of the battle of Stalingrad.

All this time, the literary enchantment of *Goede mensen* never falters and Baram represents the moral corruption of his main characters in such an incredible manner that they never lose their truthfulness. This is mainly because he doesn't portray them as confident executioners, but as mere mortals and opportunists, who live by the day under regimes of which they cannot fathom that they might at one point cease to be. Nor are they fully able to understand how far the consequences of their actions will reach – empathy is a rare beast in times of *survival of the fittest*. They have become

vandals in a time that allows them to be, for the simple reason that they are being led by factors out of their control, like fear for their own fates, a strong sense of duty and peerless ambition. When Baram's 'heroes' in the end finally realize what they have done, it is too late.

In his descriptions of fear for one's own destiny, Baram shines, especially in the chapters about the Leningrad intelligentsia, which are incredibly lifelike. In a beautiful passage, he describes how most Russians must have woken up in the days of the Great Terror: 'In the dusk of awaking, they hurried, breathlessly, to the caverns of their memories: the last people they had spoken with, had they said anything? Had they criticized anyone? Perhaps they hadn't objected sufficiently to the criticisms of others? In their consciousness the faces of enemies and friends flared up, as did the forever burning fear: those in the black cars [of the secret police] would know.'

Baram's antiheroes are the young, ambitious Berlin marketing consultant Thomas Heiselberg, son of an ex-soldier who married above his social class, and the similarly aged Russian Jew Alexandra Vajsberg, daughter of a famous nuclear physicist in Leningrad. Both become accessories to the executioners who are in charge of their countries because of the political and social-economic circumstances.

Thomas is also led by his unbridled ambition. When he loses his job because the American marketing bureau where he is employed is forced to leave Germany, and following the death of his aged mother who passed away after the Nazis had intruded her home during Kristallnacht and killed her Jewish maid, Thomas starts working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In the midst of dignified diplomats, who often want nothing to do with the Nazis, but just like Thomas see the glory of their fatherland as the greatest good, he happily develops marketing models which are used to instruct the German soldiers how to deal with the citizens of occupied Poland. The models are hailed by the Nazis and turn Thomas into a famous man. The model is consequently used to exterminate the Polish intelligentsia and the Jews.

In occupied Lublin, Thomas one night sees a group of Jews being deported.

Naked, howling, being chased by dogs, they walk underneath his window. Startled, he closes the curtains and turns around. This action is intended not to let reality disturb his ambitions. In this manner, Thomas is being towed by his vanity, without ever truly believing in the ideology of the Nazis. This must be exactly what happened to millions of Germans.

The truth imposes itself when in 1941 in Lublin Thomas witnesses a couple of Polish policemen kicking a Jewish librarian to her death. He tries to intervene and to make use of his high position to save the woman. However, his actions prove to be in vain. It does make him realize, though, that he has let himself be trapped.

Alexandra Vajsberg is just as intriguing. When her parents – members of a Leningrad group of intellectuals and artists who are critical of Stalin – are arrested and sent to Siberian camps, she allows herself to be recruited by a boyfriend from her childhood, who made his career working for the NKVD, the Secret Police. Thus, she hopes to save her own life and the lives of her two brothers, who after their parents' arrest have been sent to re-education institutions so they can serve in the army later on.

As an 'editor' at the NKVD, Alexandra is made to assist the arrested friends of her parents in coming up with credible confessions. She tells herself that this will help reduce their sentences. She pushes the thought away of what might happen to the people that she has helped convict, because she knows that it would otherwise lead to a breakdown. But she too will eventually find out what she has done and will go under.

By way of Thomas and Alexandra, Baram shows us what ordinary people are capable of. The results of their actions are by now well known, because it happens again and again in history. But it is exactly this fact that makes *Goede mensen* such a versatile, important and original novel, which you must read if you wish to understand the darker side of life.

\*\*\*\*\* (5 out of 5 stars)