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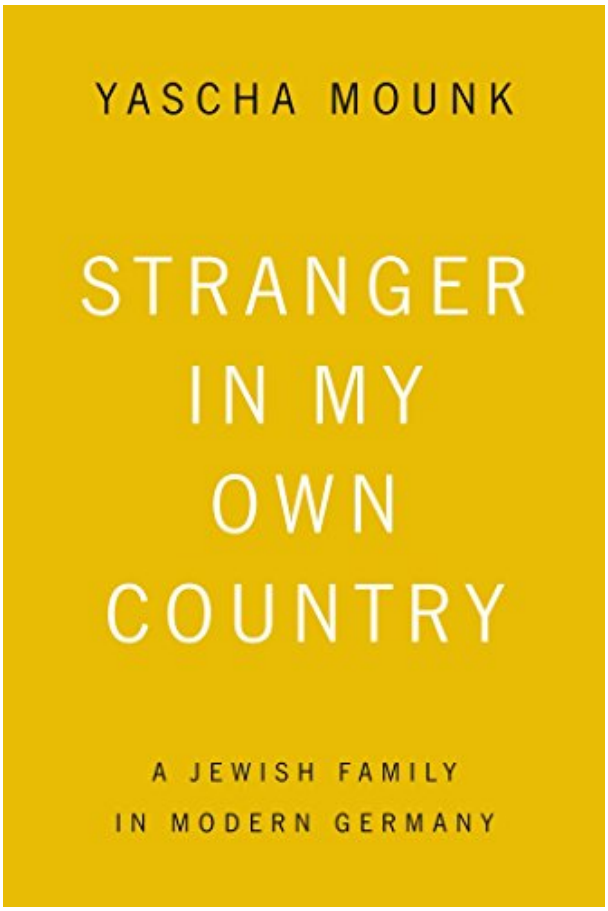

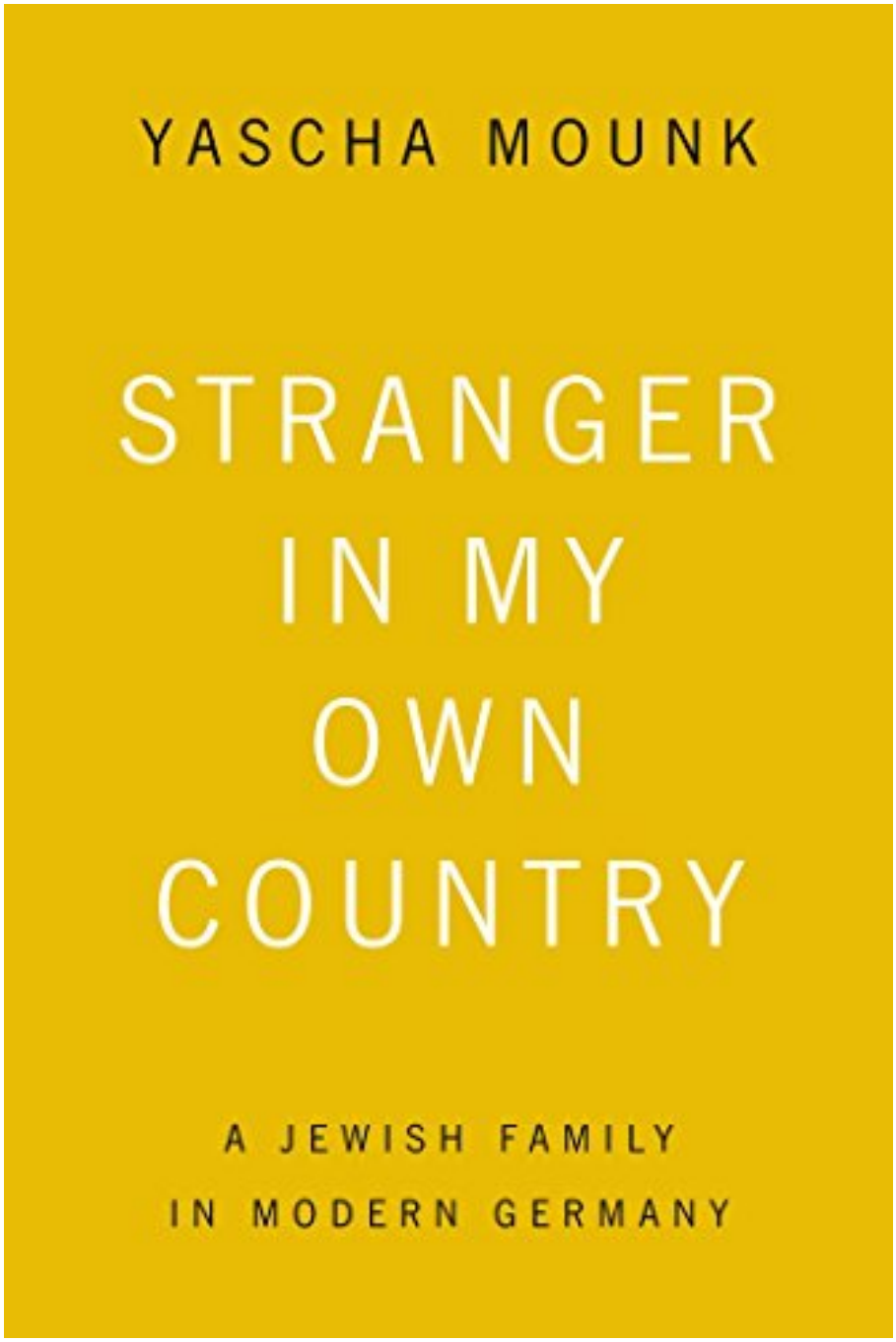

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A moving and unsettling exploration of a young man's formative years in a country still struggling with its past

As a Jew in postwar Germany, Yascha Mounk felt like a foreigner in his own country. When he mentioned that he is Jewish, some made anti-Semitic jokes or talked about the superiority of the Aryan race. Others, sincerely hoping to atone for the country's past, fawned over him with a forced friendliness he found just as alienating.
Vivid and fascinating, Stranger in My Own Country traces the contours of Jewish life in a country still struggling with the legacy of the Third Reich and portrays those who, inevitably, continue to live in its shadow. Marshaling an extraordinary range of material into a lively narrative, Mounk surveys his countrymen's responses to "the Jewish question." Examining history, the story of his family, and his own childhood, he shows that anti-Semitism and far-right extremism have long coexisted with self-conscious philo-Semitism in postwar Germany.
But of late a new kind of resentment against Jews has come out in the open. Unnoticed by much of the outside world, the desire for a "finish line" that would spell a definitive end to the country's obsession with the past is feeding an emphasis on German victimhood. Mounk shows how, from the government's pursuit of a less "apologetic" foreign policy to the way the country's idea of the Volk makes life difficult for its immigrant communities, a troubled nationalism is shaping Germany's future.

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A smart and fascinating study of an impossible situation told in the context of Mounk's own experiences growing up in Germany: Germans and Jews trying against all odds to figure out how to be normal with one another, and failing. Not, as Mount takes pains to point out, for want of trying, but the historical legacy, with all its attendant ambivalence, guilt and resentment, is just too overwhelming to be overcome with mere goodwill. Mounk's survey of the ongoing tensions emanating from the Nazi past extend beyond autobiography to German cultural life (e.g., Martin Walser, Günter Grass) and public policy (debates on participation in NATO- or U.S.-supported wars, demands on the weaker economies within the EU). - You have to feel sorry for the Germans, who can't seem to win for losing. (Mounk is careful to emphasize, however, that white Americans, with our own painful history and fraught race relations, have no reason to be smug.) While reading this book, I learned from the newspaper that some 30,000 Israelis, mainly young people, are now living in Berlin, which got me to wondering whether the problems Mounk describes are to some extent trumped by the "normalcy" of being Israeli. - I found the most moving section of the book to be Mounk's description of German Chancellor Willy Brandt's falling to his knees at the Warsaw Ghetto monument in 1970: "For one long moment there is no movement. Faces freeze. Nobody breathes. After an eternity, Brandt's breath becomes visible: he exhales, perhaps surprised by his own gesture, undoubtedly relieved to have done justice to the occasion. He, who has no personal guilt, has issued a moving plea for forgiveness. He, who need not apologize to anybody, has kneeled on behalf of those who dare not or cared not to. It was a gesture that did as much for Germany's reconciliation with the victims of the Third Reich as thirty years [1949 - 1970?] of democratic rule."

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