

BOOK REVIEWS

Michael Englishman. *163256: A Memoir of Resistance*. pp. xv+108. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007.

Theodor Adorno famously suggested that poetry was impossible after the Nazis—"Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch." Michael Englishman, in his memoir, *163256: A Memoir of Resistance*, describes how his experience at Auschwitz and other camps initially led him away from his previously strong religious convictions: "After witnessing such unspeakable crimes in the camps, how could I believe in a higher being?" (61).

Fortunately, both writers were wrong: even the Nazis could not suppress the human spirit enough to deprive survivors and future generations of the activities that had made life worth living before their reign. Adorno continued to write; others such as Primo Levi, Chava Rosenfarb, Art Spiegelman, and Roberto Benigni, went on to show how the Holocaust itself could be the prompt for lasting, memorable, even enjoyable art. And Englishman came subsequently to see his earlier loss of faith as an additional cost imposed upon him by the Germans: "... the Holocaust robbed me not only of my family, but also of my religion. This, I decided then, was something I could change" (62). In the 1950s he joined a conservative synagogue in his new home in Toronto.

Englishman's memoir is an example of the human resilience that allows us to find artistic pleasure in even the most horrible of historical events. The book chronicles the author's life as a newly-wed young man in pre-war Amsterdam, his life in the Nazi camps, and his subsequent experiences in post-war Amsterdam and Toronto. The introductory and concluding chapters and appendices discuss his post-retirement work as a lecturer on the Holocaust to schools and his recent discovery of lost relatives in the Netherlands. As such the book is both a teaching tool—a witness to the atrocities that occurred and evidence that helps counteract those who would minimize or forget the Holocaust's true nature—and a valuable memoir of a young man who did much to ensure his own survival and resist the authorities before and after he was sent to the camps.

The book is also an extremely enjoyable read. Englishman is an excellent writer with good control of detail and some wonderful stories to tell. His account of his life on the run before he was captured by the Nazis includes very exciting and often quite funny scenes of him racing across the gables high above the streets, hiding radios, and bluffing his way out of dangerous encounters with the Germans and NSBers. After he is caught by the Nazis and sent to the camps, his story is full of the lucky chances, quick thinking and clever tricks that helped keep him alive until the end of the war. In describing his time working as an electrician at the Mittelbau

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factory (responsible for producing the V2 rockets), for example, Englishman describes how he and his fellow prisoners managed to smuggle supplies for the resistance, sabotage the Nazi effort, and in one memorable scene, turn the tables on a vicious *kapo* (head prisoner) who was attempting to have him executed. Having emigrated to Toronto after the war, Englishman threw himself with gusto into the struggle against Antisemitism, even at one point going undercover and ultimately breaking into the headquarters of one nascent neo-Nazi group.

What is so good about this book is that Englishman manages to imbue his account with this “Boys’ Own Adventure” sense of excitement and suspense without ever trivializing or down-playing the horrors he was forced to negotiate. The book is imbued with a strong recognition of the extent to which chance allowed its narrator to survive where others equally clever and brave did not. And while readers almost certainly cannot but enjoy the accounts of Englishman’s adventures, this enjoyment nevertheless coexists with a constant sense of the senselessness and depravity of the situations in which he found himself.

It seems wrong to write words like “enjoyment”, “adventure,” and “excitement” in connection with a story of the Holocaust. But Englishman’s book shows how such honest, human reactions, much like his return to the synagogue, are in fact the ultimate resistance to a system that attempted to destroy the human in its victims.

DANIEL PAUL O’DONNELL
University of Lethbridge.

Tracy Kasaboski and Kristen den Hartog: *The Occupied Garden. Recovering the Story of a Family in the War-Torn Netherlands*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2008.

The Occupied Garden ends in Ontario, where two Canadian sisters visit a local church and recall how their Dutch grandparents would give them Wilhelmina peppermints to keep them quiet during the somnolent sermons. They then walk to the cemetery, where they clean the grave of *opa* and *oma*, gently scraping until the names again become clear. These last scenes reproduce, in a nutshell, the book’s entire narrative, based on the lives of Dutch couple Cor and Gerrit den Hartog and written by their granddaughters, the well-known fiction writer Kristen den Hartog, author of *Water Wings*, (2001), *The Perpetual Ending*, (2003), and *Origin of Haloes*, (2005) and her sister, Tracy Kasaboski. Although the family’s emigration from the Netherlands to Canada does play a role in the book, its main focus is the life of this Dutch family in the war-torn Netherlands under Nazi occupation.

Cor and Gerrit were born in the small town of Overschie and although their families were members of different branches within the Dutch Protestant Church (her parents were more traditional ‘Gereformeerd’, his more pragmatic ‘Hervormd’), their love proved to be stronger than any religious proscription. They married in 1935 and began their life together as simple gardeners, without any sense of the looming military machine that soon would roll in from Germany. During the German occupation, Gerrit became a member of the resistance and served as a section commander in South Holland, which the Nazis considered one of