

## BOOK REVIEWS

Debbie Spring: *The Righteous Smuggler. A Holocaust Remembrance Book for Young Readers.* Toronto: Second Story Press, 2005. ISBN 1-896764-97-5

This book tells the story of Hendrik, a Dutch boy living in Amsterdam who sees his world falling apart during the Second World War as his Jewish friends' lives become more and more restricted and they finally start disappearing. Together with his father he becomes involved in a smuggling ring as they help Jews escape to England in their fishing boat. After his father gets killed in a bombing raid, Hendrik continues the work by himself. The story ends quite abruptly after Hendrik does his first solo smuggling action. The reader is left to conclude that he continues doing this dangerous work for the next two or three years, and never gets caught. The main story is prefaced by a brief Prologue explaining the main events of the beginning of the war in The Netherlands. An Epilogue brings the reader to the year 2000, when Hendrik receives recognition for his work as a "righteous gentile" at the Yad Vashem monument in Jerusalem. Some original photos from the war period end the book.

This is an interesting story which describes quite well the inner turmoil of the young teenager while he tries to adapt to the extraordinary circumstances presented by the war situation and the threats to his friends. Since its intended audience is "young readers", I gave it to my nine-year-old son to read and asked him for his opinion. He read it in an evening and pronounced it "OK". And I would

agree with this pronouncement. The book leaves the reader unsatisfied by ending almost before the real action starts. It tells us the events leading up to what should have been the core of the book. We read about the first half of the war, the events that lead Hendrik and his father to begin their smuggling work, and Hendrik's father's death, which forces Hendrik to continue on his own. The last two years of the war, when everything got progressively worse, and which included the hunger winter of 1944/1945, could have made for some gripping action, as Hendrik attempts to keep up his work in increasingly dangerous circumstances all by himself and in spite of his mother's objections, helped by the young girl who we later learn becomes his wife after the war.

The book's topic and intended audience almost inevitably forces a comparison with the most famous of all war writing about The Netherlands, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. In terms of poetic and analytic qualities, depth of emotion, and style, the *Diary* leaves *The Righteous Smuggler* far behind. It is a fairly competently written, but otherwise unremarkable novella. Perhaps the comparison with Anne Frank's *Diary* is unfair. But the book also pales in comparison to much better-written Dutch war literature for young people such as Jan Terlouw's *Oorlogswinter* (published in English as *Winter in War Time* by McGraw-Hill in 1976).

The plot, which according to the blurb on the back cover is "based on real events", contains a

fairly large number of geographical and historical inaccuracies and implausibilities that detract from the overall success of the narrative. The biggest problem is with the geographical setting of the story: certainly, if there were fishermen who smuggled Jews to England, then these would not live in Amsterdam. For, in contrast to what is suggested by passages where Hendrik and his father go out to sea to fish from their Amsterdam harbour, Amsterdam does not have access to the North Sea. Amsterdam's harbour leads via two long canals to the North Sea, one ending up in IJmuiden, to the West, and one ending up in Den Helder, to the North. To the East there is access only to the IJsselmeer, a large lake that itself provides access to the North Sea via a series of locks to its North. A map in the back of the book places Amsterdam too far to the South, and its harbour approximately where the city of Huizen would be, about 50 km. to the East on the IJsselmeer, not on the North Sea.

The events that open the book highlight the odd geography: as Hendrik and his father are fishing in the canals of Amsterdam (sic!) on May 10<sup>th</sup> 1940, they pick up a distress signal from a boat drifting "north toward Denmark" on the North Sea. Hendrik objects to going out to help them, because it is "at least an hour out to sea" and he does not want to miss his birthday party. A boat drifting north on the North Sea would be nowhere near Denmark, which would probably take more than a day to reach in a little fishing boat of the kind owned by Hendrik's father. And anyone on a boat in the Amsterdam canals would take at least a half day to get to an entrance to the North Sea. An hour would hardly get you from the canals into the harbour.

A number of other factual inaccuracies and implausibilities occur. Various passages suggest that there are sharks in the North Sea, which is not the case. On several occasions Hendrik makes phone calls home, once from his friend's house and once from the hospital, whereas it is highly unlikely that poor people such as his parents would have had a telephone connection at that time. When the cheese comes in on market day Hendrik's mouth waters as he thinks "of the large round fresh Gouda and Havarti cheeses". Havarti is a Danish cheese that was certainly not common in The Netherlands during the war. (It still is not – I had never heard of it until I came to Canada in the mid nineties.) One day in 1941 or 1942, Hendrik's father is making breakfast. Even though the book mentions food shortages and rationing a number of times, Hendrik not only eats toast first, but then his father makes him fried eggs as a kind of second breakfast. Hendrik even asks for, and gets, a second serving of eggs. Even apart from the fact that eggs are not a usual breakfast food in The Netherlands (except for the occasional soft-boiled egg on Sunday or other special occasions), they would have been a luxury in the city even before the war. It is unthinkable that anyone living in a city would have eaten three eggs for breakfast on a normal week day in the middle of the war, unless perhaps they owned their own chickens.

When Hendrik goes back to school after the summer holidays in September 1940, there is a new teacher who forbids them from speaking Dutch and tells them they will now speak German in school. This is not based on fact. Schools did not force their students to speak only German and teachers were generally not replaced, unless they

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were Jewish. When Hendrik and his father go fishing, they cast rods and put worms on hooks. Commercial fishermen fish with nets, not rods. Another problem relating to the fishing is the question of how realistic it is that there would be much fishing going on in North Sea waters during the war. The Germans controlled the North Sea and did not let anyone near the coast.

Then there are the names, or at least their spellings. Hendrik's last name is "Vandinther" and one of his friends is called "Vandussan". These names would certainly be spelled "van Dinther" and "van Dussen" (with an -e-, not an -a-), unless they were Flemish. Another of his friends is called "Goodman", which is simply not a Dutch name; it sounds far too English.

In conclusion, this is a not very well researched book, which, while tackling an interesting subject, avoids the crucial period of the war by stopping the narrative half-way through the war, and leaves the reader unsatisfied with its abrupt ending and unrealistic detail. For a historical novel claiming to be based on real events it contains too many inaccuracies. Whoever wants to introduce their young readers to literature about the Second World War in The Netherlands would do better to give them Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* or English translations of Dutch books such as Terlouw's *Winter in War Time*.

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Ton J. Broos, Margriet Bruyn Lacy and Thomas F. Shannon, eds.: *The Low Countries: Crossroads of Cultures*. Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2006. (Studies in Dutch Language and Culture, 1).

This volume contains selected papers from the ICNS conference held in 2002 in Ann Arbor. It is the first in the new series of such publications, which replaces the old PAANS series. The new format is compact; quotations are set in on the left but not on the right; the type is small, especially the footnotes and lists of references, but it is readable. There is an index of names mentioned in the papers, but not the usual mini-biography of the contributors, which it is always interesting to have. The volume's striking cover no doubt represents convergence; it suggests icicles or a broken window, to my mind, rather than a crossroads, but no matter.

The opening section, on art history - the papers selected are arranged by field - keeps very well to the theme of the Netherlands as a cultural crossroads, which that country certainly has always been. Shelley Karen Perlove examines the portrait (1642) by Salom Italia of the great Jewish rabbi of Amsterdam, Menasseh ben Israel, who sought to build a relationship of understanding with Protestant leaders throughout Europe, in the hope of bringing about a millennium of tolerance which could save the world. Cécile Tainturier restores the reputation of *Light [sic] der Tekenen Schilder konst* (1643), the drawing manual in which Crispijn van de Passe combined the German concern with measurement and proportion, the French concern with perspective, and the Italian insistence on copying models. So far from being out of date when it appeared, as has been claimed,