

George Reinitz and Richard King, *Wrestling with Life: From Hungary to Auschwitz to Montreal* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 212 pp., ISBN: 978-0773551374.

Jane Errington writes that books in the "Footprints Series" (McGill-Queen's University Press) that she edits are "the life stories of individual women and men who were participants in interesting events." They "help nuance larger historical narratives, at times reinforcing those narratives, at other times contradicting them" (the two above quotations taken from the front matter). This is the twenty-fifth book in that collection and there is nothing unpredictable, nuanced, or contradictory of larger historical narratives here. Marketing explains in part why the book will work well as a good story. It screams in advance precisely the linear narrative readers might expect. In the transitional title, in the cover photograph of an intense, young George Reinitz in wrestling garb, and in acclamatory cover/website blurbs from Ultimate Fighting Championship superstar Georges St. Pierre, Daniel Rabinowicz (president of the Montreal Holocaust Museum), and Daniel Ayalon (Israeli ambassador to the United States, 2002-06), we get the picture. As former Olympic wrestler Howard Stupp notes in a marketing gloss, this is a "fascinating and inspirational story recounted in a profound yet simple manner, straight from the author's heart" (taken from the book cover).

That Reinitz survived Auschwitz is, of course, profoundly atypical of the death camp horror most readers will recognize. At the same time, the story faithfully replicates recent inspirational Holocaust survivor stories in testimonials and in film. These include that of the Jewish Hungarian philanthropist George Soros, but are distinct from the more existentially, morally, and psychologically complicated narratives of Primo Levi or Vladek Spiegelman. From a comfortable childhood in Hungary, Reinitz was deported to Auschwitz. Through circumstances that are as fascinating as Stupp advertizes, Reinitz survived Auschwitz and made it to Canada where he flourished as a modestly successful wrestler and a winning entrepreneur. This is Reinitz in Reinitz's own words, in a narrative that, while heartfelt, gives the impression of having been rehearsed many times. The result is a collection of declared certainties, mixing memory with after-the-fact assessment of events, unencumbered by what a generation of Holocaust historians has found.

Reinitz's accounts of his time in Auschwitz are gripping (though one keeps wondering what "with Richard King" means on the cover, alongside the author's name). Touchstones of survival are familiar and speak to the protagonist's exceptional intelligence and pluck, the generosity of those around him, adaptability in the face of extreme violence, and good fortune. This is useful as a primary document and as a remarkable window into memory formation. Despite the author's intent on conclu-

sive certainties, there are unresolved contradictions as interesting in some respects as the story itself. Reinitz addresses why Jews did not anticipate their fate in war-time Hungary. “We believed,” he writes, “that... we would live through the difficult war years and things would return to normal after the war ended.” But in the next sentence he explains: “I suspected then... that we were naïve in our beliefs.” And in the sentence after that: “we were always optimistic” (21). Which was it? After the war, at age fourteen, Reinitz writes that he was consumed by anger and sorrow, a “dangerous combination” (68). This is a brief but eye-opening period about which the author writes of his sexual frustrations sharing a bed of necessity with a young woman who refused his repeated advances, his first business venture as an itinerant agricultural harvester (with his own tractor), and his tax troubles with a communist government hostile to Jews – all before landing in a Budapest orphanage.

Testimonials exude emotion. This one features rage, as the post-Holocaust sorrow dissipates. There was a street fight in downtown Montreal when Reinitz grabbed a man between the legs with one hand and by the shoulders with the other, then picked him up and threw him hard to the ground. Reinitz was so afraid that he had killed the man that for days afterward, he listened to the radio for news of the incident – news that never came. A few years later, with his wife at a restaurant, Reinitz confronted a patron over an anti-Semitic remark. When the latter repeated the slur, Reinitz cut the man’s face with his keys then gave the man’s friend “a hard whack with the heel of my hand on his cheekbone.” The Ukrainian *kapos* at Auschwitz, Reinitz tells us, “used to hit us this way” (95). After childhood in Auschwitz and young adulthood in Montreal, the latter half of the book comes across as a bland disappointment punctuated by platitudes. Gone are the raw emotion and dynamism that makes the story interesting through Reinitz’s early years in Canada. It’s as though the author loses interest in his own journey. The wrestling trajectory is that of a good, but in no way exceptional, athlete. “Wrestling,” we learn, “combines the physicality of all sports with the need for mental acuity” (101). “A wrestler must focus totally on the competition” (108). The story of Reinitz’s courtship of his wife, Eleanor, is empty by comparison to earlier chapters, as is the story of his furniture manufacturing business, Jaymar. The dramatic high point of the courtship came in 1957, after they had been dating for a few months. When Eleanor fainted while watching a wrestling match, Reinitz’s reputation as “a player” was such that “those who knew me opined that she had fainted because she was pregnant” (115). From conversations with Japanese and German skiers in Europe, Reinitz learns that “no matter how good I thought Jaymar furniture to be, it was not good enough. This became my credo: we would always try to make our furniture better” (139).

Here as elsewhere in the story, Reinitz is deeply influenced by a handful of individual conversations. At least in part, they shape his assessment of national reckonings with the Holocaust. His few unhappy interactions with what seem from his descriptions

of working-class, rural Hungarians during his two return visits to his first homeland contrast sharply with more positive interactions with more prosperous Germans. On a ski trip to Switzerland, a group of Germans he meets tells him that “they had been to Israel and that they intended to return there so they could work on a kibbutz” (137). In the following sentence he writes: “I began to understand that the German people were trying to come to terms with their past, to admit that they had done a serious wrong” (137). Then in the next sentence he notes: “I couldn’t say as much for other European countries, especially Hungary” (137).

Whether or not Germany has done “more” than other countries to come to terms with the Holocaust is hardly the point. What we’re left wondering here and elsewhere is how Reinitz reached his conclusion. Did the handful of conversations confirm what he had read somewhere? Did the conversations themselves shape his views of national reckoning? Of course, in the end, a testimonial cannot be held to account for more than what it is, in this case, Reinitz on Reinitz.

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