

H-France Review Vol. 15 (November 2015), No. 169

Alex Kershaw, *Avenue of Spies: A True Story of Terror, Espionage, and one American Family's Heroic Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Paris*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2015. 320 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index.[1] \$28.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8041-4003-4.

Review by Kirrily Freeman, Saint Mary's University.

Avenue of Spies chronicles the remarkable story of the Jackson family, Swiss-American expatriates living in Paris during the German occupation. Sumner Jackson was a physician at the American Hospital in Neuilly, and lived with his wife Charlotte (Toquette) and son Phillip on the upscale Avenue Foch, near the Champs Élysées. Sumner and Toquette met during the Great War when Sumner was a battlefield surgeon and Toquette, a Red Cross nurse. They chose to settle, not in Sumner's native New England, but in Paris and their long-awaited only child, Phillip, grew up in privileged surroundings, attending the Lycée Janson de Sailly and spending weekends and school holidays at the family's summer house in Enghien.

With the German invasion and the swift defeat of France in the summer of 1940, however, the Jacksons' leafy upscale neighborhood was taken over by Wehrmacht officers and Gestapo agents, and each member of the family, in their own way, became committed to resisting the occupation. Sumner treated downed Allied airmen and POWs and, once they were well enough to travel, forged death certificates, provided new identities, and helped funnel these servicemen out of France. Toquette Jackson became involved with the resistance organization Goélette, offering her home as a "drop box." Twelve-year old Phillip, like other boys his age, stole chalk from his classroom to draw "Victory V's" wherever he could. But he also went on a "vacation" to Saint-Nazaire and took clandestine photographs of the German naval installations there, which he then passed on to his mother's contacts in the resistance.

The Jackson family was arrested by the Milice on 25 May 1944, a mere fortnight before D-Day and three months before the liberation of France. They were taken to Vichy for interrogation but were eventually transferred to the custody of the Gestapo. Ultimately, Toquette was sent to Ravensbrück and Sumner and Phillip to Neuengamme concentration camps. In April 1945, Toquette, near death, was transferred to the Swedish Red Cross. Sumner and Phillip were moved from Neuengamme to a prison ship, the *Thielbeck*, which set sail from the port of Lübeck just days before the end of the war, only to be sunk by the RAF. Phillip managed to make it to shore, but Sumner disappeared. His body was never found.

Alex Kershaw's subtitle for this family biography is right on the mark. The Jackson family's story is a gripping one of "Terror, Espionage, and Heroic Resistance." But it is also a story that has already been told, in a much more full and nuanced way, by Hal Vaughan. Vaughan's *Doctor to the Resistance: The Heroic True Story of an American Surgeon and His Family in Occupied Paris* was published in 2004.[2] The "painstaking research" highlighted by Kershaw's publicity material is, in fact, largely Vaughan's. Many an evocative quotation and pithy anecdote come from Vaughan's book and, disappointingly, often appear pared down and simplified in Kershaw's, with vital context or evidence left out. One example is Phillip Jackson's trip to Saint-Nazaire. By Vaughan's account, based on archival sources, the trip was a

resistance mission, the camera supplied by Toquette's Goélette contacts. In Kershaw's version, based on interviews with Phillip Jackson, it was a vacation, the camera Phillip's own, and the photographs simply a naïve and childish game.[3] The problem here is certainly not that there are differing sources and interpretations, but rather that Kershaw never engages with Vaughan's findings.[4] Kershaw never justifies a re-telling of the Jacksons' story, never explains any differences in interpretation, nor acknowledges the substantial body of archival evidence upon which Vaughan's interpretations are based.

Furthermore, what new information Kershaw does bring to this story is largely tangential. For example, a secondary character Kershaw follows throughout the book is Helmut Knochen, head of the SS in Paris. Knochen was an important figure in Nazi Paris, and he lived and worked on Avenue Foch just a few doors down from the Jacksons. Kershaw invests a lot in the fact that the Jacksons were conducting their various clandestine activities under the noses of their Gestapo neighbors. But ultimately the Jacksons were arrested by the French Milice and interrogated and interned in Vichy, not by Knochen and the Gestapo on Avenue Foch in Paris. We assume that Knochen must certainly have known about the Jacksons and their activities, but any actual connection between the SS chief and the Jackson family's fate is missing from Kershaw's account. Likewise, Kershaw devotes a chapter to recounting the events of the 20 July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. This provides context for a discussion of the relationship between the Wehrmacht and the SS in Paris, but brings little to the story of the Jacksons and certainly added nothing new to our understanding of this well-known event.

I am not the first reviewer to point out such shortcomings in Kershaw's work. Mannie Liscum, in a review of Kershaw's *The Longest Winter* for *The Journal of Military History*, laments "a retelling providing little new information or insight [which devotes] considerable text to the discussion of well known events and people...[and] more often than not this merely serves to distract the reader from the central story." [5] James McCrostie in *Labour/Le Travail* emphasizes that Kershaw's biography of Jack London relies on the same sources used by previous biographers but with no attempt to justify yet another biography. [6] Unfortunately, with *Avenue of Spies*, Kershaw continues this trend.

There is, apparently, a film version of *Avenue of Spies* in the works (Kershaw is also a screenwriter), and one can certainly imagine the likes of Matt Damon and Marion Cotillard bringing the Jacksons' remarkable story to life. But if I were looking for an account to assign to students, or a scholarly resource to bring to my own work, I'd reach for *Doctor to the Resistance* rather than *Avenue of Spies*.

NOTES

[1] The review copy of *Avenue of Spies* supplied to H-France was an uncorrected proof. In addition to a number of typographical and factual errors, the images and index were missing.

[2] Hal Vaughan, *Doctor to the Resistance: The Heroic True Story of an American Surgeon and His Family in Occupied Paris* (Dulles: Brassey's, 2004). Hal Vaughan died in 2013.

[3] Vaughan, pp. 71-76. Kershaw, pp. 100-103.

[4] Vaughan's book is mentioned in Kershaw's bibliography and notes. The notes are formatted, strangely, by text excerpt rather than by number and are not signaled in the text itself.

[5] Mannie Liscum review of Alex Kershaw, *The Longest Winter* in *The Journal of Military History* 69/2(2005): 596-597.

[6] James McCrostie review of Alex Kershaw, *Jack London: A Life* in *Labour/Le Travail* 43(Spring 1999): 272.

Kirrily Freeman
Saint Mary's University
kirrily.freeman@smu.ca

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172