

Bold defiance in Nazi Paris

By Barbara Mellor

Translator of Resistance: Memoirs of Occupied France

Notre Guerre, Souvenirs de Résistance, Agnès Humbert, 1946.
The listing on French eBay didn't give much clue as to the treasure that lay in store.

Neither title nor author meant anything to me. But a memoir of the French Resistance published so soon after the war and - most intriguingly - written by a woman, might be worth a couple of euros.

When it arrived, Notre Guerre - its evocative cream-coloured cover darkened with age, its blotting-paper pages roughly cut - exhaled the atmosphere of wartime Paris. There was no preamble, no introduction. As I started to read, I was plunged directly into the Parisians' agonized anticipation of the arrival of the German army in their beloved city in June 1940.

Humbert's journal sent shivers down my spine. The powerful immediacy of the narrative, the raw intensity of the subject matter, the compelling presence of Humbert herself - all were overwhelming, electrifying.

But who was Agnès Humbert?

A respected middle-aged art historian at one of Paris's most illustrious museums, Agnès Humbert was an unlikely candidate for Resistance heroism. But amid the chaos and bitter ignominy of defeat her soul rebelled ("I feel I will go mad, literally, if I don't do something!").

Her character leapt off the page: impetuous, pugnacious, fiercely intelligent and irreverent, with an indomitable sense of humour, moral passion and integrity that would never desert her throughout the ordeal that awaited her. This was the woman, after all, who (I learned from her fellow résistants) would distribute incendiary tracts in the streets of Paris from supplies stuffed down her stocking tops, who would delight in making Vive de Gaulle stickers to paste on the back of German military vehicles.

With her artist's eye, her self-deprecating humour, her talent for spotting the absurd and her palpable sense of outrage, Humbert was an irresistible companion, who offered a riveting day-by-day account of the genesis of the Resistance.

That stifling summer, in a leap of blind faith and reckless courage, she and a handful of her distinguished colleagues at the Musée de l'Homme - eminent ethnographers and Egyptologists, linguists and librarians - formed what was almost certainly the very first organized Resistance group.

It was as though the upper echelons of the British Museum had turned to new careers as urban guerrillas and saboteurs. In those desperate early days, they could not have known that their unlikely little group would become the nucleus of a great movement; that one of their number would rise to work at De Gaulle's right hand; and that plans they passed to British intelligence would contribute to the strategically crucial raid on the U-boat base at Saint Nazaire in 1942.



Agnès Humbert's secret journal was first published in 1946

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War heroine 'not classed leader'

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By that time, it turned out, they had also recruited a double agent who would betray them to the Gestapo.

Its leaders arrested one by one, the Musée de l'Homme network was to earn a tragic place in history. The Gestapo came for Humbert at her sick and elderly mother's hospital bedside.

Soup kitchens

After a year of brutal imprisonment and interrogations, the group was tried before a military court. The seven men were condemned to death by firing squad; the women had their death sentences commuted to slave labour in Germany.

So for Humbert there began three years of slavery for the German war machine, a little-documented nightmare dubbed 'the other Holocaust'.

Long-awaited liberation at last arrived in the form of an advance unit of the American Third Army. Exhilaration was rapidly spiced with exasperation. Faced with the incomprehension of American officers (not noted, as she observed drily, for their political acumen) and the cowering inertia of the local German population, Agnès threw off her shackles to set up first-aid posts and soup kitchens for the armies of the dispossessed - including, at her express insistence, German civilians.

Furthermore, through her own indefatigable efforts she set up an embryonic denazification process on the one hand, while on the other arguing stoutly that indiscriminate persecution of the Germans would only encourage the rise of 'another Hitler'.

Generous as ever in her recognition of the human values for which she was prepared to lay down her life, on publication of her journal in May 1946 she sent a copy to the conspicuously fair Wehrmacht officer who had presided over the Musée de l'Homme trial, inscribing it to him 'without rancour'.

Barbara Mellor is the translator of Agnes Humbert's memoirs which are published as Resistance: Memoirs of Occupied France by Bloomsbury.



“ The Gestapo came for Humbert at her sick and elderly mother's hospital bedside ”



Humbert continued to write books on art until her death in 1963

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