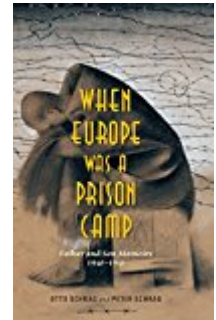


Otto Schrag, Peter Schrag. *When Europe Was a Prison Camp: Father and Son Memoirs, 1940-1941.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. Illustrations, map. 328 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-01769-7.



Reviewed by Sebastian Huebel

Published on H-War (April, 2017)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

How do you review a memoir or, more precisely, two memoirs, the first one written in the midst of World War II, the other in the 1980s? Though an unconventional endeavor, the Schrag family story of survival and escape by illegal routes through Western Europe is so thrilling that it not only deserved to be published by a reputable university press but also to be scrutinized by scholarly eyes that are familiar with the history of the Holocaust and World War II.

The two memoirs, written independently by the father Otto Schrag in 1941 and his son Peter Schrag in the 1980s, retell the family's story around a time of great upheaval and uncertainty for German Jews in Europe prior to the implementation of the Holocaust. Otto was born into a family of bourgeois origins in southwest Germany (Baden) and made a career in the beer malt-processing business. When his business was "Aryanized" in 1935, he and his family moved first to Luxembourg and then to Brussels, Belgium, in 1939, with Otto again pursuing a living in the

same industry. With the outbreak of war in the fall of 1939 but prior to the German invasion of Belgium and France, the family's life took a sudden turn for the worse when the Belgian government arrested all men of German citizenship—who were mostly Jewish escapees—as enemy aliens and deported them, with several stopovers, to the internment camp Saint-Cyprien in southern France. With Otto deported, his wife Judith and son Peter (born in 1931), stayed behind and shortly after, fell under the jurisdiction of the German occupying forces. After an unsuccessful attempt to make it toward the Atlantic coast near Dunkirk, together with thousands of other European Jewish and non-Jewish refugees hoping to find refuge in England, and being cut off and left in uncertainty about her husband, Judith made the highly dangerous and courageous decision to illegally cross the border of occupied Belgium into the occupied part of France, camouflaged as a nurse while pretending to work for an aid organization, followed by an even more risky crossover from the occupied part into (semi-independent) Vichy

France where her husband was interned. Through not entirely comprehensible circumstances, Judith was able to meet her husband in southern France, and together, with some other couples, they temporarily resided in a French mountain village with the generous help of local Frenchmen. After a few weeks, Judith, again on her own, repeated the perilous travels back to Belgium to retrieve her son, who had stayed behind, to also bring him to southern France. Reunited, the family then attempted to immigrate to Mexico, one of the only countries at the time that was still issuing resident visas. While his wife was en route back to Belgium, Otto delved into the dodgy world of smugglers, passport forgers, and hustlers to explore possible means to (semi-)legally get out of Vichy France, which he (and many others) rightly feared was relenting to German antisemitic pressures. Going through a complicated process of talking to untrustworthy people in cafes and the streets of Marseilles, Europe's center of despairing refugees, hoping they might know someone who might be able to help, Otto was startlingly successful in jumping over all the bureaucratic hurdles and obtaining for his family and himself an exit visa from France, a transit visa through Spain, another transit visa for Portugal, a transit visa for the United States, and finally a resident visa for Mexico. As Otto, together with a friend, traversed these borders into Portugal without his family, a truly nerve-wrecking experience, Judith managed a third illegal crossing from Belgium into occupied France and into Vichy France, together with her son. Eventually reunited in Lisbon in June 1941, a year and a half after Otto had first been arrested, the family moved to the United States where the book's co-author, Peter, made a career as a writer.

What makes these father-son memoirs truly unique, besides the incredible story itself that includes many facets of intrigue, hope, and resilience, is the methodology that the editor, Peter, uses. The stories are narrated by both authors, father and son, focusing on the same time period

and the same events, but from different perspectives, fluently complementing one another, even though they were written at different times and independently of each other (Peter claims he wrote his memoir in the 1980s but had never before read his father's 1941 memoir). The remarkable result is a synthesized double-memoir that brings the reader back into the 1940-41 period to emphatically relive this time of war, chaos, and antisemitism, with the Holocaust looming in the background. Organized chronologically, each chapter is comprehensively demarcated by subsections, each devoted to one specific memoir. Whereas Otto used a third-person narrator-voice, Peter's preference is first person, making the flow of both memoirs easy to follow and distinguish. As a further intervention, Peter thoughtfully guides the reader not only by selecting and putting together the most suitable passages of each memoir to construct a coherent narrative but also by providing footnotes that clarify details or, at other times, reflect on his own confusions pertaining to passages in his father's memoirs that he does not understand or cannot corroborate with facts. In particular, Otto's seemingly effortless ability to receive a one-day furlough to meet with his wife in the French town of Perpignan, just outside the internment camp (to which he did not return), seems indeed baffling (p. 160).

Integrating two memoirs into one story, the result is a fascinating, almost Hollywood-like family drama-thriller with a happy ending. The historical significance of such a uniquely put-together work by a child survivor is that it provides invaluable insight into the social and emotional lives of a family of non-elitist European Jews from a bottom-up perspective that, in 1940, could not have predicted the murderous intentions of the Nazis but that still experienced enough oppression to want to make the entire family escape from the Nazis. Trying to make a new and indeed successful living, first in Luxembourg, then in Belgium, is proof of the courage and remarkable resilience European Jews demonstrated when mov-

ing into unfamiliar terrain, exposing themselves to contingencies and dependencies, including the unpredictable reception by locals in Brussels or the French countryside.

A further, perhaps more poignant significance of both memoirs, apart from the palpable demonstration of Jewish agency during World War II, is the practice of European Jews becoming pawns of Europe's governments, subject to often arbitrary, bureaucratic harassment and discrimination, as well as local residents and their participation in anti-German and/or antisemitic resentments. Otto's vivid description of his deportation is proof of how Jews could be treated dehumanizingly not exclusively by the Nazis, even in Western Europe and prior to the actual Holocaust. His recollections of being incarcerated as an enemy alien in Brussels and then shipped for days in cattle cars, a "means of transportation" the Nazis would also soon use, and being deprived of water, food, and no less essentially, breathable air in the summer heat of 1940, conditions that caused numerous deaths, underlines this. Being attacked with stones by locals when the train made intermittent stops on its way to France further emphasizes this, as well as the scandalous conditions in the camp itself, where the most basic sanitary and medical standards were not upheld. A picture thus emerges of European bystanders being not so passive and collaborators, such as smugglers who took Jews and others illegally over the borders, profiteering from people's hardship and miseries. Finally, this extraordinary story says much about resistance itself in wartime Europe. Otto's memoir is full of details of how he came into contact with loosely organized resistance groups in Marseilles, including former French civil servants and military men who in the background sabotaged the German and Vichy governments and who depended on financial support by people like Otto who were willing to pay any price to obtain the necessary travel permits. Most important, however, the memoirs are proof of how European

Jews themselves resisted the grabbing hands of the Nazis and their helpers.

In terms of criticisms, it would have been appreciated if the editors, Peter and the publisher, had provided even more footnotes to better clarify the complexities, seeming contradictions, and intricacies of the stories. It is not clear, for instance, how the family ended up in the United States even though they only had resident visas for Mexico. The lack of or conflation of dates, years in particular, also makes the chronology of the story harder to grasp than necessary. A few dates seem to be historically false, in fact. Most saliently, in chapter 8, Judith and Peter's run to Dunkirk apparently happened in the fall of 1941 and in the authors' biographical paragraphs on page 292, the invasion of Belgium by the Nazis is also puzzlingly dated to 1941, when both, the attempt to escape and the invasion, occurred in 1940. Finally, a brief discussion on the style of Otto's memoir would have been warranted, as in several sections, the memoir takes on a style similar to one of a historical novel. For instance, Otto retells at length, even using direct speech quotations, how his wife shifted through occupied Western Europe, negotiating with strangers the crossing of borders, while clearly Otto was not with his wife at the time and did not even know about his wife's whereabouts and well-being. Such passages, thus, are not the personal recollections that usually constitute a memoir but narrative constructions that need to be read with a critical eye. It would have been interesting to learn more about how Otto, Judith, and Peter lived with, processed, and communicated their incredible stories following their arrival in New York.

Despite these minor criticisms, *When Europe Was a Prison* is a skillfully interlaced narrative that generates empathy and admiration for the people in these various episodes, especially women, who as Peter emphasizes, risked so much to stay alive and keep their families together. It is a greatly entertaining but equally insightful and im-

portant read for anyone interested in the history of World War II, the Holocaust, and Jewish history. In its combined format, it is a worthy read and invitation for further scholarly and pedagogical use.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Sebastian Huebel. Review of Schrag, Otto; Schrag, Peter. *When Europe Was a Prison Camp: Father and Son Memoirs, 1940-1941*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47718>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.