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Personal stories of World War II Europe make the horrors more real

Rachelle Linner Catholic News Service Catholic News Service | May. 13, 2008

DIARY OF A WITNESS, 1940-1943
By Raymond-Raoul Lambert
Translated by Isabel Best
Ivan R. Dee
Copyright (2007)
288 pages $27.50

To understand a period as complex as World War II and the Holocaust we need to read both trained historians and ordinary men and women. Historians provide a broad overview and an understanding of context but it is only individuals who can communicate the intimate details of what it is like to endure the suffering of mind, body and soul that is the reality of war.

Personal narratives can elicit the empathy and identification that move the reader to compassion and insight. The two books under consideration, while not among the central Holocaust narratives, are important in fleshing out our knowledge of those terrible years.

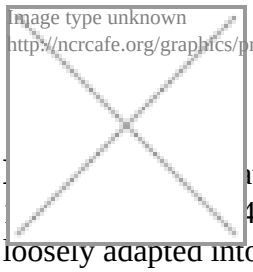
Raymond-Raoul Lambert?s ?Diary of a Witness,? published in association with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, offers the reader an opportunity to understand the thoughts and struggles of a controversial leader of France?s Jewish community. From 1941 until his arrest in August 1943 Lambert was the director of the General Union of the Jews of France, an organization that was established by the Vichy government. Lambert?s role was fraught with difficulty, requiring as it did work with both French and German officials.

Although it is an essential document for students of Vichy France, ?Diary of a Witness? is a difficult book for the general reader. Many of Lambert?s entries about his organization?s activities seem arcane and his references to French political and literary figures are without salience.

Some of these problems are ameliorated by the excellent notes and clarifying introduction of its editor, Richard I. Cohen, a professor of French Jewry studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Cohen clarifies the complicated internal politics of the General Union of the Jews of France and identifies the legal, military and historic issues referenced in Lambert?s diary.

In a July 1941 entry Lambert describes conditions in an internment camp for foreigners in France, more than half of whom are Jewish. ?In the midst of the catastrophe shaking the world, how many individual tragedies there are, what vast undeserved suffering!? he wrote. Lambert?s struggle to reconcile his Jewish and French identities deserves to be included in the reservoir of suffering that was Nazi Europe.

Lambert was a complex and flawed man who was asked to take on grave responsibilities. His decisions have been, and will be, judged by history, but readers of this book will emerge with respect for his courage in wrestling with the idolatry of loyalty as the reality of the Vichy regime undermines the ?humane culture? of France.



PRIESTBLOCK 25487: A MEMOIR OF DACHAU
by Jean Bernard. Translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider.
Zaccheus Press (2007). 196 pages $14.95.

Father Jean Bernard (1907-1994) was a prisoner in the Dachau concentration camp from May 1940 to 1942. ?Priestblock 25487? was originally published in a newspaper series in 1945 and was loosely adapted into the acclaimed 2004 German film, ?The Ninth Day.?

Father Bernard?s factual narrative is direct and explicit reportage and as such it gives a brutally honest recitation of what it was like to endure the clergy barracks of Dachau. It is difficult to imagine how people managed to endure these depths of misery: physical and emotional torture, starvation, disease, unceasing cold, hard physical labor and merciless guards.

Moreover, conditions could, and often did, change radically. At the whim of sadistic guards and the camp commandant, rations were cut and prisoners were assigned to more dangerous or useless work details, or forced to undergo collective punishment exercises.

Father Bernard does not offer theological reflections on his experience but in a luminous passage he describes participating in his first Mass at Dachau. ??Hoc est corpus meum.? I look at the two bits of bread in my hand, and as the one for whom we are suffering all this comes into our midst, as in their hearts hundreds of priests join their offering with that of the Savior, tears roll down my cheeks. It becomes a single offering that certainly creates new ties between heaven and earth.?

It is because of his suffering that Father Bernard has the right to call on us not to forget, but to forgive. ?We must forgive while remaining conscious of the full horror of what occurred, not only because nothing constructive can be built on a foundation of hatred ... but above all for the sake of him who commands and urges us to forgive, and before whom we, victims and executioners alike, are all poor debtors in need of mercy.?

[Linner, a freelance writer and reviewer, lives in Boston.]

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