

Intelligence in Public Media

Avenue of Spies: A True Story of Terror, Espionage, and One American Family's Heroic Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Paris

Alex Kershaw (Crown Publishers, 2015), 228 pp., notes, bibliography, index, map, and photos.

Reviewed by David Foy

The sudden military collapse of France and the ensuing German occupation of Paris in 1940 came as a shock to most Frenchmen but also to American Hospital of Paris surgeon Sumner Jackson, his wife Toquette, and their young teenage son Phillip—known to all as “Pete”—whose idyllic prewar life in a tony section of the capital would come to an abrupt end. Alex Kershaw’s latest book discusses, in brief fashion, the family’s tenuous relationship with French authorities—Vichy and Free French alike—post-spring 1940 and with the German occupiers, both the polished officers of the Wehrmacht and the sadistic spycatchers and security officers of the Gestapo and the Schutzstaffeln (SS).

Initially tolerated by German and Vichy authorities alike, the Jackson family’s presence at No. 11 Avenue Foch drew increasing attention once the United States was at war with Germany in December 1941, particularly since their immediate neighbors soon included the local Gestapo offices, intent upon identifying and interrogating suspected Resistance members. Nazi suspicions of the family’s activities grew in the face of rumors—accurate, as it turned out—that Sumner was using the hospital as a temporary shelter for downed Allied fliers, who mysteriously showed up in allied capitals several weeks later with the correct paperwork. He hid a B-17 tail gunner in his home for a time and his house became a “drop box” for intelligence-related photos and documents, notably including information on the V-1 rocket “buzz bomb.” However, it was the accommodation work that Toquette began doing for various Resistance networks in France—work which fascinated the young Phillip—beginning in the summer of 1943 that ultimately brought the Gestapo to their door. Toquette served as the touchstone for the Goelette Resistance network and the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) agent network known as Prosper, among other groups. Kershaw uses such instances to highlight a larger lesson within the book—namely, the angst of professional duty versus personal responsibility.

Sumner’s “private war” against the Nazi occupiers ultimately led to his arrest on 24 September 1942 and his internment at a camp for American captives approximately 50 miles northeast of Paris. However, throughout his ordeal, his personal acquaintance with various powerful French officials would save him from longer and more savage incarceration. In this case, it was his relationship with 70-year-old General Adelbert de Chambrun, governor-general of the hospital and a World War I hero (and a regrettable supporter of collaborator Marshal Philippe Pétain) that prompted Sumner’s release within a few weeks.

But the reprieve proved only temporary and by the time Paris was liberated on 25 August 1944—first by the French, shortly thereafter by the Americans—Sumner and Phillip were in the Neuengamme labor camp, 10 miles southeast of Hamburg, Germany. Ironically, that same day, US Secretary of State Cordell Hull sent Swiss authorities a telegram asking about the status of the Jackson family. At Neuengamme, Sumner worked in the camp hospital but lost a finger to infection, ending his career as a surgeon, but also went to great lengths to protect his son, finding a replacement for him on a post-bombing work detail that proved fatal for most assigned. As World War II ended, Nazi officials frantically moved prisoners out of the hands of the advancing allied armies. Sumner and Phillip, both French speakers, were offered the opportunity to join a French-speaking group headed for Sweden; however, they elected to stay with Sumner’s patients instead and found themselves on a train to Lubeck and ultimately on a ship, a fateful decision.

Kershaw focuses more, however, on the brutally shocking treatment of Toquette at the hands of the Nazis, from imprisonment in Romainville, France, to the intimately-described details of the horrors of Ravensbruck extermination camp, to a ship bound for Sweden, with the assistance of the International Red Cross. Of the 550 women deported from France with her on 15 August 1944, Toquette was one of only 17 survivors, and she barely alive.

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A particular bonus for intelligence officers who read Kershaw's book is the mention of several Office of Strategic Services (OSS) members who were acquaintances of and often worked with Sumner, men such as Donald Coster, mentioned prominently in former Foreign Service Officer and journalist Hal Vaughn's book, *FDR's Twelve Apostles*, operating in pre-Operation TORCH Morocco, and Max Shoop, both of whose exploits deserve wider attention as part of CIA's "pre-history."

Kershaw, a bestselling author, has written eight previous books, most concerning little-known individuals and dramatic incidents during World War II. Overall, *Avenue of Spies* is an engaging read, with helpful maps and photos, and short chapters that invite even the busiest of readers. He is particularly skilled at describing the various French, German, and American personalities in the book and the depth of animosity between the professionals of the German Army and the thugs of the Gestapo and the SS.

Despite Kershaw's obvious talents and popularity, however, readers will find aspects of the book to critique—for example, he often takes what is by definition a dramatic and heart-wrenching tale and seeks to embellish

it further through hyperbole. Thus, the sentence that described newly-occupied Paris as a city which "lay hushed in a darkness it had never known" (28) makes one wonder what words those who witnessed the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and the wars of 1871 and 1914 might have used. His assertion that in 1942, the United States had "no formal foreign intelligence service" prompts thoughts of a history of the US Coordinator of Information (COI) and OSS. A similar declaration that the Final Solution was "the greatest crime in human history" is trite and certainly disputable in light of the millions who died at the hands of Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and others.

While *Avenue of Spies* is the most recent book to describe the Jacksons's life in Paris under Nazi occupation, it is not the only one—in 2004, Hal Vaughn's first book, *Doctor to the Resistance: The Heroic True Story of an American Surgeon and His Family in Occupied Paris*, also focused on the Jacksons. One reviewer assessed Vaughn's book as "a good book; not outstanding but comprehensive with some unique insights." In that sense, Kershaw's is also a good, but not great, book, one that makes an engaging and emotional read and, despite flaws, adds to the oeuvre on the strength of the human spirit in crisis.

