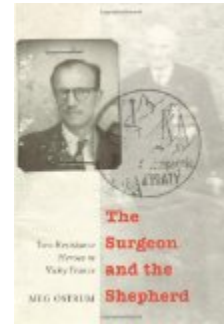


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Meg Ostrum. *The Surgeon and the Shepherd: Two Resistance Heroes in Vichy France*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xiii + 208 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3573-1.

Reviewed by Sean Martin (Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio)
Published on H-Genocide (July, 2006)



Heroes of the Resistance

Meg Ostrum's account of a little-known episode in the history of World War II's Belgian resistance highlights the wartime roles of two very different men. In cooperation with Jean Sarochar, the Basque shepherd of the title, Charles Schepens, a Belgian surgeon, led a resistance operation that escorted at least a hundred individuals across the Pyrenees Mountains from France to Spain to relative safety. Schepens, trained as an eye surgeon before the outbreak of the war, was forced to flee Belgium in 1942, leaving behind his wife, Cette, and children. Through contacts in the Belgian resistance, Schepens was able to realize a project that eventually led him to achieve his ultimate goal of reunification with his wife and children. Stumbling upon an abandoned logging facility in the Pyrenees, Schepens conceived the idea of using the logging operation in Mendive as cover for transporting fugitive Belgian resistance fighters across the mountains and to relative safety.

The first part of *The Surgeon and the Shepherd* recounts in great detail the 1920s building of the logging camp, explaining the economics of the region and including information about the local population. A decade later, the flourishing operation fell victim to the Great Depression, lying dormant until its rediscovery by Schepens.

Parallel to this story is the account of Schepens's education in Belgium and his experiences as a reserve officer in the Belgian medical corps. The book then shifts to the main part of the story, that of the shepherd and the surgeon. In 1940, Schepens became active as a member of

the Belgian resistance through his military ties. But in 1942 he was forced to leave his family and flee to France, assuming the false identity of Jacques Pérot. In France he began cooperation with others working in the resistance, including two Russian émigrés, friends from his school days.

Determined to reunite with his family, Schepens conceived the idea of rebuilding the abandoned logging operation in the Pyrenees. The sawmill provided cover for the transportation of documents and individuals and allowed him to live in hiding with his wife and children. After establishing the complex network of relationships necessary for the success of the mill and rescue operation, Schepens searched for a man able to lead individuals across the mountains with both the physical skill and the required discretion necessary to succeed. Sarochar, with his reputation as a local storyteller, was an ideal choice. Sarochar had spent his entire life in the mountains and was well prepared to evaluate the safety of any given situation, choose different routes, weather changes, and to shepherd his charges to safety. Sarochar's penchant for storytelling also, paradoxically, assured his reliability. The local population trusted Sarochar and knew to dismiss many of his tales as simply outlandish. The tale of Schepens's efforts to rebuild the mill and fool both the local Basques and Germans makes *The Surgeon and the Shepherd* a compelling story of espionage.

Schepens's wife and children joined him in Mendive allowing him to achieve one of his goals in re-establishing the sawmill as a functional operation. The

mill operated as a point of transit for at least one hundred people and documents for about a year, from 1942 to 1943, until the Germans learned of the activities of “Monsieur Pérot,” and Schepens was forced to flee once again.

The story Ostrum tells is an unusual one that illustrates the effects of larger historical events on individuals, however far removed their worlds. Schepens’s flight across the Pyrenees and the experiences of his family after his flight make for compelling reading. Though Ostrum is clearly respectful of Sarochar’s role in the rescue operation, the book relies primarily on the story of Schepens, whom Ostrum, an oral historian, was able to interview at length. Unfortunately, this emphasis seems to steer Ostrum away from any significant observations on class. Schepens and Sarochar came from wildly different backgrounds and, interestingly, their postwar experiences do not veer from the paths we might have expected them to follow if the war had not intervened and brought them together. Schepens eventually left Belgium to pursue his innovative career in medical research in the United States. Sarochar has remained in the mountains, living simply, amid mementoes of his heroic experiences in both world wars. As heroic as Schepens’s

actions were, however, Sarochar’s story is perhaps more interesting even though we may have been shortchanged in that regard. Ostrum does discuss the role of legend and storytelling in Basque culture, but more explication of Sarochar’s role as both transmitter and creator of local legend would have been appreciated.

Those interested in the role of the Belgian resistance during the war or in the history of the Pyrenees region will find *The Surgeon and the Shepherd* especially fascinating. Others will find a remarkable story of the effect of larger historical events on individual lives. Ostrum’s account of this episode in the Pyrenees reminds us that history is a tale of the actions of individuals and that individual choices matter. Ostrum’s careful explication of the motivations of both Schepens and Sarochar encourages us to think about risk and ability. The abilities of both men were useful during the war; their choice to use those abilities for the good of others, despite the life-threatening risks, was unique. Ostrum has brought us a work that shows just how nobly individuals can behave. Her stirring account of wartime deeds reminds us that seemingly impossible tasks can be accomplished when we use our talents to best advantage.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-genocide>

Citation: Sean Martin. Review of Ostrum, Meg, *The Surgeon and the Shepherd: Two Resistance Heroes in Vichy France*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11958>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.