

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ian MacMillan. *Village of a Million Spirits: A Novel of the Treblinka Uprising*. New York and London: Penguin Books, 2000. 257 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-029033-2.

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## The Emphasis Is on the Gruesome Detail

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MacMillan's book is a novel. In the interview that follows his story he says he has not talked to anyone who was at Treblinka and has never been there. He has done it all through reading. But, unlike Paul Erdman's books about Switzerland's role in the Holocaust, MacMillan provides no footnotes. The book screams for a treatment like Erdman's.

For example: We all know about the shipment of people packed tightly together in boxcars, but MacMillan also describes a luxury train from Vienna, on which the passengers, described as rich Jews, drink champagne. The reader cries out: "Where did MacMillan get this idea from? Were there such luxury trains from Vienna in October 1942?" The reader is left wondering, having to trust that MacMillan has written a historical novel that deals honestly with history even if all the characters except Kurt Franz are fictional.

I was unaware that a novelist could use footnotes until I read Erdman. I did not use them in my two historical novels. I wish I had. Although the book's subtitle refers to the Treblinka Uprising, the book is neither about the uprising nor about what actually happened to the survivors who escaped. In point of fact, the book is a catalog of ugly scenes that could have been written by the Maquis de Sade. The horrors keep occurring and one is worse than the previous: rape, torture, murder. One particularly gruesome scene involves the cutting off of a Ukrainian guard's finger with a hedge clipper. You can actually feel the pain, hear the screams be-

cause MacMillan is a very good writer who can tell a story in a few words. Overhanging the story is the inevitability of death. You die tomorrow if there is a mark on your face, so the Germans always hit the Jews in the face. You are taken to the "Hospital," a place for murder. A Jew is killed because Kurt Franz thinks the Jew has been cruel to his dog. The killing is gruesome. But running parallel to the story is the tale of Magda, a Polish girl who is in labor, pregnant by the Ukrainian who suffers the finger amputation. Frankly, I wanted to skip these pages. I did not care about the fact that Magda's water had broken, that Magda was in pain. She was an interruption to the story of the uprising.

And then we get to the uprising itself. Magda's boyfriend has sold guns to the Jews. (Oh, if we only could have had a footnote or two!) The uprising takes place, but it is only a few pages in the body of the work. It tells us little of what happened. It is the exact opposite of Richard Rashke's *Escape from Sobibor* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1982) which described the breakout in minute detail and made it convincing. MacMillan's escape falls flat.

One disconcerting thing about *Village of a Million Spirits* is that the inmates of Treblinka are consistently referred to as "workers." They are never called slaves; seldom called Jews (although we are always aware that they are Jews). There is one brief scene in which Romani Gypsies come to Treblinka, but their fate is left unclear. But we get altogether too much of the fate of the "workers," whether they empty out boxcars, search clothing for valuables, carry bodies, extract gold teeth. We feel

their hunger, their thirst, and their pain. MacMillan is a fine writer, but this is an abhorrent book. We don't learn much about either the Germans (whom MacMillan consistently calls "officers" even if they are enlisted men) or the Ukrainians. Which brings up one particular Ukrainian, "Ivan Grozny" (Ivan the Terrible), the operator of the tank engine that feeds carbon monoxide into the gas chamber. "Ivan Grozny" is famous. Jean-Francois Steiner in *Treblinka* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967) describes this monster and has him killed during the heroic uprising. Macmillan refers a few times to an Ivan, but never tells much about him. That's a pity in view of the large body of evidence about Ivan that surfaced during the trials of John Demjanjuk (which I reported for the Toronto *Globe and Mail*). Here is a book,

written after the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that Demjanjuk was not "Ivan Grozny" and it tells us nothing about "Ivan Grozny." One thing that MacMillan makes absolutely clear is that the Germans and the Ukrainians stole all they could from the prisoners and from the Third Reich. The staff and inmates of Treblinka look forward to each new trainload of loot.

In the interview at the end of the book, MacMillan cites the response of Treblinka commandant Franz Stangl to Gitta Sereny when she asked: "What did you think at the time was the reason for the extermination of the Jews?" "They wanted their money," he replied. As a professional writer for stamp collectors, I found MacMillan's depiction of the seizure and handling of a valuable stamp collection (of U.S. stamps, of all things) almost farcical.

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