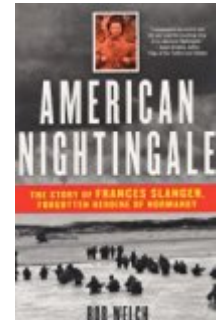


Bob Welch. *American Nightingale: The Story of Frances Slinger, Forgotten Heroine of Normandy.* New York: Atria Books, 2004. xi + 309 pp. \$22.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7434-7758-1.



Reviewed by Katherine Burger Johnson

Published on H-Minerva (March, 2005)

This biography of a World War II nurse does what most good biographies do; it puts the life of one individual in the context of his or her historical surroundings, allowing the reader to learn not only the story of one person, but also the importance of an entire period in history. Frances Slinger, a Polish Jew who immigrated to the United States with her family as a young child, grew up to defy traditional Jewish gender roles by pursuing a career and by joining the military. She was one of the nurses who waded ashore at Normandy Beach in June 1944 and ended up one of the thousands of U.S. troops (but few American women) killed by enemy fire during World War II.

Author Bob Welch tells the complete story of Slinger's life in a compelling style, from her early childhood to her death, including events after she died. The early chapters alternate between describing her life growing up in the Roxbury section of Boston as the daughter of a fruit peddler and recounting her days in the army. This shifting of the narrative could be disconcerting to the reader, but Welch uses this method skillfully, just as flashbacks are often used in film narratives to

flesh out a character or illuminate a particular situation. He also includes background and epilogue information about her family and some of those closest to her in her medical unit to complete the story.

Frances Slinger recorded her thoughts in poetry and prose and collected inspirational writings of others, and the author uses these writings to flesh out the description of Slinger as a person. As it happened, Slinger gained a bit of fame for a letter she wrote to the Army's newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, downplaying the work of the nurses and praising the dedication of the average G.I. Slinger was killed the day after she wrote the letter, so she never saw it in print nor knew about the tremendous response it received from the troops.

As noted in his author's note at the beginning of the book and in the source notes that appear at the end, Welch used Slinger's own writings, extensive interviews with still-living members of her medical unit, and did what appears to be exhaustive research in various archives to write the story of Slinger's life and its effect on others. At

one point, he proudly states, "my ultimate standard for credibility is having had the manuscript edited and approved by a nurse, a doctor, and a mess hall cook from the Forty-fifth Field Hospital Unit itself--those who were there" (p. xi). At the same time he admits that the total story can never be known.

Slanger's story is important for many different reasons: she was an immigrant, she grew up in a poor family, she strove to be in a profession when that was not acceptable in her cultural surroundings, she was part of one of the most famous events of World War II, and she was one of the small number of American women killed in action in that war. This account of her life and death serves as a reminder that women can and have persevered and adapted to very difficult situations, and that women have been willing to serve their country--and that some gave their lives in that service.

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Citation: Katherine Burger Johnson. Review of Welch, Bob. *American Nightingale: The Story of Frances Slanger, Forgotten Heroine of Normandy*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. March, 2005.

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