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Judy Barrett Litoff, ed., *An American Heroine in the French Resistance: The Diary and Memoir of Virginia d'Albert-Lake*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. xxxviii + 270. \$29.95 U.S. (hb) ISBN (978-0-8232-2581-1). \$16.95 U.S. (pb) ISBN (978-0-8232-2582-8).

Review by Kathryn N. Jones, Swansea University.

For decades after the end of the Second World War, female resisters remained *la face cachée* of historical accounts of the French resistance movements. The process of recovering the contributions of *les résistantes* and the instrumental part played by *les maillons essentiels* was begun by feminist historians in the mid 1970s.[1] Renewed prominence has been given to the role of women in the French Resistance in the past few years, with the death of the most famous *résistante*, Lucie Aubrac, on 14 March 2007; the publication in English in 2008 of the diary and memoir of the *Musée de l'Homme* resister Agnès Humbert and the release of the feature film *Les Femmes de L'Ombre* (released as *Female Agents* in English) starring Sophie Marceau and directed by Jean-Paul Salomé, about female SOE agents.[2] Virginia D'Albert-Lake was one of the few American women to play an active role in the French resistance, and she is the best known and most decorated of the handful of American women who worked for the escape lines.[3] She was also one of the small number of Americans to have endured the experience of a German concentration camp for political deportees. During the late 1940s d'Albert-Lake submitted the manuscript of her memoir to several publishers in the United States and Great Britain, but they rejected it due to a lack of readership for books dealing with any aspect of the war. The publication of this compelling and vivid personal testimony is therefore both timely and long overdue.

Born in 1910 in Dayton, Ohio and raised in St. Petersburg, Florida, teacher Virginia Roush met Frenchman Philippe d'Albert-Lake in 1935 and married him in 1937, when they settled in Paris. She began keeping a diary in October 1939, written in pencil in four different notebooks. In 1943 she and Philippe began to work for the *Comète* escape line extending from Brussels to Gibraltar, which had been founded in 1940 by Belgian Andrée de Jongh in order to organize the evacuation of downed Allied airmen. The couple hid a total of sixty-six airmen in their Paris apartment and home in Nesles on the northern outskirts of the French capital. Philippe d'Albert-Lake eventually headed the Paris area of the *Comète* before being forced to go to London via Spain after his wife's arrest in June 1944. Virginia and Airman Alfred Wickman were arrested by a German patrol as the d'Albert-Lakes were accompanying eleven airmen by bicycle to a hidden camp for downed aviators near Châteaudun. After being held in Fresnes and Romainville prisons, she was deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany on 15 August 1944, ten days before the liberation of Paris. From Ravensbrück she was sent to the Torgau munitions factory at a subcamp near Buchenwald, and then to a subcamp at an airstrip near Königsberg Neumark. There she experienced a false dawn of liberation on February 2 1945 when the prisoners believed that they were about to be freed by the Soviet army, only to be ordered by the German SS to begin a death march back to Ravensbrück. Thanks in part to the unstinting efforts of her mother and the US State Department, she was sent to Liebenau internment camp for enemy nationals on February 28 "on the border line of life and death" (p. 221).[4] The camp was liberated on April 21, and she

arrived in Paris a month later on May 27 1945. She died at her family home in Cancaval, Brittany on September 20, 1997.

The excellent introduction by Judy Barrett Litoff provides extensive biographical information and expertly sets out the wider historical context, detailing the work of the escape lines and the conditions in the numerous concentration camps where d'Albert-Lake was imprisoned. Her meticulous editing must also be praised highly, and her careful footnotes offer a wealth of detailed bibliographical and historical explanations. Part I contains d'Albert-Lake's diary, written between October 11 1939 and April 1944, which overlaps chronologically with her memoir in Part II, entitled: "My Story" (Fall 1943-late May 1945). The memoir is followed by a short epilogue recounting her return to Paris. Further information on the history and provenance of the texts would have been welcome. Barrett Litoff notes that the original handwritten manuscript of d'Albert-Lake's diary did not survive, but was typed by her husband after the war. It would also have been instructive to learn whether the diary and memoir were revised during the sixty-year gap between genesis and publication. A diary entry dated August 29 1940 seems to point towards some retrospective alterations. The entry reports the view of one of the German officers who had requisitioned their property in Cancaval that the German army would soon cross the English Channel. D'Albert-Lake responds: "Poor thing, if he had known that the Channel that was going to prevent them from ever laying a foot on English soil was perhaps a hundred times wider than the estuary he was pointing out to us" (p. 74).

The diary bears witness to the early stages of the war, the German invasion, the defeat of France, the exodus and the occupation. At times it reads like an adventure novel, a jolly jape in wartime France full of "fun and interesting experience[s]" (p. 27) as she follows Philippe to his various military postings. Occupying the unusual and rarely documented position of a soldier's wife determined to accompany her husband, she is able to comment first-hand on the French troops' poor conditions and lack of supplies, and she witnesses their retreat and the "unbelievable" sight of the "parade" of the exodus (p. 38). In her diary the personal and familial are juxtaposed with remarks on the developing war situation: "To celebrate [my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday] I have the curse! Hence no baby; have had the symptoms of a miscarriage. Yesterday was some day and mostly unlucky. I went to Paris and chose the day of the first bombardment of the city. We are told 240 German planes and 1,087 bombs dropped" (p. 34). At the outset d'Albert-Lake appears to take a pacifist stance, stating that she would prefer that a mass be said for peace rather than the victory of France (p. 8). The entries gradually take on a more critical tone, and her increasingly politicized stance is reflected in her astute political observations and commentary on the fall of France.[5] She became highly critical of what she regarded as French indifference and a lack of patriotism after their defeat: "I wonder if the calm unperturbed way that the French in Dinard are accepting their invaders is not more a spirit of not caring than one of fear. It may be another sign of the decline of this country" (p. 56). Yet she continually refused to return to the US, resolving to stay with her husband in France. After September 1940 the diary adopts an increasingly shorthand form, and becomes somewhat more prosaic, detailing her concerns about food shortages and rationing, gas restrictions, the scarcity of firewood, and her fears that she might be interned as an enemy national and that Philippe (might) be conscripted to work in Germany.

There is an instant contrast between the everyday relation of material practicalities contained in the diary, and the narration of her "thrilling" (p. 96) and "exciting but enervating period" (p. 101) with the Resistance in the memoir. The intersections between the diary and memoir can be found in a single reference to witnessing five men bail out of a downed Flying Fortress. It was a chance encounter with US airmen hidden in the local bakery at Nesles in the autumn of 1943 rather than any deep political conviction which led the couple to commit to working for the *Comète* escape line. In his contribution to the volume, their son Patrick notes: "my mother never talked about what she did as being heroic. She genuinely thought it was normal" (p. xxxv). Written in 1946 as part of a first wave of testimonial accounts about the war, the memoir was intended as a kind of letter to her late mother, and it could be argued that this intimate approach may be responsible for the work's uncommonly powerful sense of

immediacy. At times the narrator also addresses her readers directly, urging them to comprehend her experiences and emotions. Describing the unrest in the overcrowded “human freight train” (p. 149) during her deportation from France to Germany, she appeals to the reader: “If you can imagine what it is like to be tired and sick and nervous, and to live under such trying conditions of overcrowding with lack of ventilation, night and day, in the stifling heat of a smelly box car, in the month of August, you will realize that, under such strain as that, women can’t be at their best” (p. 145).

Conversely, d’Albert-Lake’s account does not specifically thematize the gendered nature of her role as a resisting woman, though gender stereotypes do come into play. Women’s roles in the *Comète* resistance movement consisted mainly of convoying, sheltering, feeding and clothing airmen. She called the women responsible for accompanying the men to different hideouts “girl guides” (p. 103), and their presence was vital in securing the safety of the highly conspicuous Allied airmen. Once she was seen by an old friend of her husband’s walking arm in arm with an airman, and she notes that “on that occasion I felt that my reputation as a faithful wife was badly compromised” (p. 96). D’Albert-Lake daringly took several aviators sightseeing around Paris, sensing their need for freedom. At the time of her arrest and subsequent interrogations, this *sang froid* was also very much in evidence, as she tried to appear “dignified, but not proud, confident, but not aggressive” (p. 128). Throughout the memoir, moments of fear and suffering are alleviated by an indomitable sense of humor. On being transported to Fresnes prison in Paris, she notes: “None of the Germans were familiar with Paris so I was obliged to direct them to the well-known Gestapo Headquarters, rue des Saussaies. It was like directing my own funeral!” (p. 119). She describes the attitude of the Gestapo official who questioned her there as “one of polite active interest, like that of a life-insurance salesman” (p. 119). During her interrogations d’Albert-Lake did not reveal anything about the nature of her work for *Comète* nor the location of the *maquis* camp where 152 airmen were eventually hidden, and the work of the escape line was able to continue unhindered.

D’Albert-Lake’s account of her internment in a series of Nazi concentration camps and subcamps contains a wealth of detailed recollections, incisive observations and judicious reflections. Upon her arrival in Ravensbrück, she realizes: “Everything seemed calculated that the prisoners die without actually being killed” (p. 159). Commenting on the deceptively neat appearance of the cotton sheets covering the mattresses in her *bloc*, which were actually covered with fleas, she states: “The Germans can give a very beautiful, impressive finish to the ugliest and rottenest of foundations” (p. 158). D’Albert-Lake probes moral questions with characteristic honesty and integrity. She reflects that the “laws of self-preservation and of the survival of the fittest were becoming something real, no longer titles in a psychology test. Were we sinking to bestiality? Perhaps. Unselfish gestures were becoming more and more rare” (p. 176). Yet along with her steadfast will to live in the face of the horrific conditions she faced during her internment, her own humanity shines through. Her bravery, compassion, practical nature and sense of solidarity with her French comrades lead her to secure invaluable food reserves for others and carry countless friends to the infirmary after fainting during the interminable morning roll calls. Her candour extends to a description of her own appearance, as she recounts the shock she felt at seeing her own reflection during the journey to Liebenau. “What ugly creature was this? A woman, yes, but neither hips nor breasts, great lusterless eyes staring out of the grey countenance, the skin stretched like parchment over the skull and high cheek bones, beneath which were empty holes; no hair line showed under the sagging turban. I turned away in horror” (p. 233).

*An American Heroine in the French Resistance* is especially rich because of the multiplicity of perspectives that it offers, and as such it will be appreciated by students and scholars alike. In the prologue Patrick d’Albert-Lake notes the “indirect and subtle ways” in which the war’s impact on his mother manifested itself (p. xxxv), and journalist and close family friend Jim Calio offers a poignant tribute to the couple in the afterword. Original documents from the d’Albert-Lake family archive, such as the deportation note written by Virginia on August 15, 1944 (passed on to her family by a sympathetic bus driver), are reproduced in the text, along with a number of photographs. The appendix includes an official report

written by Philippe d'Albert-Lake detailing *Comète* activity between December 1943 and July 1944, and the first letter written by Virginia to Philippe after her arrival in Liebenau. The volume closes with useful recommendations for further reading. Virginia d'Albert-Lake is an exceptional figure, not only in terms of her wartime activities and the wealth of sources that document her life, but also because of the widespread recognition she received. She received the *Croix de Guerre* shortly after the end of the war and the *Légion d'Honneur* in 1989, and was also awarded an American medal for her service. In her unusually vivid account of *les années noires*, Virginia d'Albert-Lake's indefatigable voice and forthright tone resonate clearly, and the volume is a very welcome addition to the war memoir genre.

## NOTES

[1] See Rita Thalmann, "L'Oubli des femmes dans l'historiographie de la Résistance," in Françoise Thébaud, ed., *Résistances et libérations: France 1940-1945* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1995), pp. 21-35.

[2] Agnès Humbert, *Resistance: A Woman's Journal of Struggle and Defiance in Occupied France*, trans. Barbara Mellor (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

[3] Memoirs by other American women who were active in the French Resistance include Drue Tartière, *The House Near Paris* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946); and Devereaux Rochester, *Full Moon to France* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

[4] Her mother Edith Roush died of leukemia in mid April 1945, unaware of the ultimate fate of her daughter. Her numerous letters sent to the U.S. Secretary of State, the War Department and the Red Cross, asking them to intervene in her daughter's case, are reproduced in the appendix.

[5] Extracts from her letters home to the U.S. containing eyewitness accounts of bombings, the exodus, defeat and occupation were published in the *St. Petersburg Times* in July and August 1940.

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