

Résistance - Memories of Occupied France by Agnes Humbert.
Bloomsbury 2008.

Agnès Humbert, who died in 1963, was a distinguished French art historian at the Musée de L'Homme in Paris, with a collection of friends of high academic and intellectual calibre, who set out to form a resistance group in response to the German occupation of Paris in 1940. The history of her group was short but tragic, for within a year of its formation and the commencement of work which, while it lasted, was highly effective, she and her comrades were betrayed to the Gestapo and imprisoned.

Humbert's group, one of the first of the French resistance, was composed of men and women, and following their betrayal they were imprisoned, questioned and in some cases tortured, after which the men were executed by firing squad and the women sent to Germany as slave labourers.

Throughout her experiences, Agnès Humbert kept a frank and honest diary, and although it was first published after the war in 1946 in French, until this year it had never been translated into English. Thanks to Barbara Mellor's excellent translation this has now been rectified and Résistance is the result.

The book is divided into ten chapters, the first two dealing with the fall of France and the occupation, the next four dealing with Humbert's imprisonment in different places, the seventh and eighth with her time as a slave labourer and the ninth with the fall of the Reich and its impact on her and her fellows. The final chapter is about Humbert's involvement in hunting down Nazis following her liberation.

Agnès Humbert was a redoubtable woman and her writing has a power and immediacy to it which is compelling; sometimes the subject of her diary entry is amusing, not least with regard to aspects of setting up her resistance cell, at others it is full of pathos as with her experiences in prison with her colleagues and the way they tried to cope with their incarceration and the threat of death and torture that hung over them, or her time at the labour camp of Anrath; and at yet others, as with her hunt for former Nazis, it is deliciously vengeful though the chapter ends on a most uplifting note.

There is also an excellent introduction by William Boyd and an afterword by Julien Blanc, who wrote the introduction to the 2004 French edition of Humbert's book.

Résistance is a marvellous addition to the collection of memoirs of the Second World War that burgeons rather than diminishes with every passing year, and is a diary of great literary, historical and emotional worth.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh