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A Woman's Miraculous Journey in 'Outwitting' the German Secret Police

Lucie Aubrac's memoir, *Outwitting the Gestapo*, is extremely valuable as a primary source and as a memoir. Her journey in aiding the French resistance and rescuing her husband from the German secret police while simultaneously evading capture are nothing short of miraculous. Her experiences can be validated by Historians records and research on the era and by her sincerity in her attempt to recall events as accurately as possible. As a first-hand account, the reader gains much insight into the period and the experiences of the common French citizens.

Memoirs are powerful because they are the accounts of people who were actually there, and not just complete fabrications. As primary documents, they are extremely valuable in analyzing the inner workings of the people of a time period. While the author may misremember the details of certain events, such as what was had for breakfast on life changing days, or embellish upon prose, the emotions and characters are real. Memoirs also tend to cover long periods of time, time in which many things are actually happened. Their legitimacy is generally trustworthy, and can be corroborated through the works of historians. Mundane occurrences take on new meaning when considering the state of society at the time. Normal, everyday happenings in Aubrac's memoir show how hard the people were trying to live a normal life, despite living in an enemy occupied country.

However, the subjectivity of memoirs is a double edged sword; readers are getting a first-hand account and being put into the shoes of someone of the time, however, they are also getting a biased view. Aubrac, for example, could not have known what was going through the minds of the leaders of Vichy during her period of resistance. Another disadvantage is that the author's emotions can cloud the reader's state of objectivity. While reading, the reader feels a connection with the author of the memoir, in this case, Aubrac. It's hard to not root for her victory and the victory of the resistance. She recalls a scene in which the Gestapo kicked down a woman holding

a baby, “Today I know what hate is, real hate, and I swear that these acts will be paid for.”¹ One must also remember that though the author is recounting his or her own experiences, things may have been edited or information could be false since the author is only telling from their own point of view. Despite the disadvantages, memoirs are extremely beneficial due to the vast amount of information they contain on what people did during important events in history.

Aubrac’s memoir provides a glimpse into the inner workings of the resistance by showing how resistance occurred. Aubrac recalls in May 1943, “I have a class tomorrow with my third-year students: agriculture in France. My preparation consists of just two short paragraphs devoted to soil conditions and climate, and sneakily develops at length what fits with the most present reality—the shortage of manpower resulting from more than a million being held as prisoners of war, three-quarters of whom are farmers.”² Aubrac was one of the resisting schoolteachers during the occupation by Germany, and her experience provides proof of resistance and also what she chose to teach. In addition to agriculture, she taught her students about French war history.³ She was not afraid to “dramatize” the current situation of the country whenever she could.⁴

She also recounts how she received resistance newspapers in the mail that, “I will read them later in the toilet and find out what’s in them. But for the time being, I calmly pick them up with the other mail. If it is a trick, people will plainly see that I’m not reading them.”⁵ While possibly a bit excessive, the fact that Aubrac felt she had to read the newspapers out of the sight of prying eyes (such as in the toilet) says a lot about the societal situation. Aubrac even provides

¹ Aubrac, Lucie and Translated by Konrad Bieber. *Outwitting the Gestapo*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1993. 99.

² Aubrac, 24.

³ Aubrac, 28.

⁴ Aubrac, 27.

⁵ Aubrac, 26.

insight into what rationing was like during the time. “Each adult is entitled to one liter of wine every ten days. So there are three liters a month, for adults only, and even this works only if the store has been supplied... It is also a ten-day cycle for tobacco. One pouch of tobacco or two packs of Gauloises—for adult men only, of course.”⁶

In a more direct fashion, Aubrac also recounts her experiences of actually working with the resistance network, such as when they free prisoners from Antiquaille hospital. “That escape has been set for Monday, May 24th, in the morning... This afternoon we’ll reconnoiter at the hospital as a last minute pre-caution. No one will notice us among the many Sunday visitors... I don’t doubt for an instant that we will succeed.”⁷ Though it seems hard to believe that Aubrac could have remember such dates as she includes in her memoir, she explains to the reader in her preface, “I have tried to tell things as accurately as possible. I was helped in this effort by my own memory, that of my husband, and the testimony of my comrades.”⁸ Her admission lends a sincerity and believability to the memoir that helps to legitimize it.

“Outwitting the Gestapo” can be taken as meaning many things, but for Aubrac, it seems to have mostly meant foiling the Gestapo and rescuing her husband from execution when he was captured. Her actions in participating in the resistance, such as at Antiquaille, show this. When her husband is captured by the Gestapo, Aubrac relays a wrenching and absurd scene, “Something snaps inside me. I can’t help crying. Suddenly I realize I’m pregnant. We’re going to have another child, and he [the German officer] just says: “It’s not my fault; he deceived you, that’s all.”⁹ What follows is a determined journey to securing her husband’s freedom. “I have an

⁶ Aubrac, 25.

⁷ Aubrac, 29-30.

⁸ Aubrac, 7.

⁹ Aubrac, 81.

obsession: I must find a way to communicate with Raymond.”¹⁰ She goes on to create a new, false identity for herself and changes her appearance.¹¹ Despite being told at one point that Raymond was dead, she goes on an incredible journey that leads to her husband’s rescue on October 21st, 1943.¹² Whether the date is correct is not important. What is important is that Aubrac beat the odds and rescued her loved one from execution by the Gestapo. Despite getting him back tortured and underfed, he and Aubrac ended up living a long life together, and she even ended up giving birth to her daughter in London, just as she wanted.¹³

Aubrac persevered through a combination of luck and determination. Her kindness and strong sense of justice did not allow her to tolerate the Gestapo, and as a result, she became an active part of the French resistance movement. When her husband was captured, she expended every resource and connection to change her identity and not only find him, but rescue him. As a historical source, her memoir is valuable in that she details much of her participation in the resistance, from her experience as schoolteacher and scholar to her participation in radical resistance activities. Her story is not diminished or invalidated by her point of view and high emotions; rather it is enhanced and given a powerful new legitimacy.

¹⁰ Aubrac, 97.

¹¹ Aubrac, 105.

¹² Aubrac, 166.

¹³ Aubrac, 227.

Works Cited

Aubrac, Lucie and Translated by Konrad Bieber. *Outwitting the Gestapo*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1993.