

Rochlitz, Imre (with Joseph Rochlitz). *Accident of fate: a personal account, 1938-1945*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ont., 2011. xii + 223 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95.

Almost two decades ago Ernst Pawel published a memoir of his teenage years spent as a Jewish refugee in Yugoslavia 1934-1938, entitled *Life in Dark Ages*. Just about when Pawel family emigrated to United States another Jewish boy, Imre Rochlitz sought refuge in Yugoslavia. But this is where similarities between these two accounts of Jewish refugee teenagers fade away. With the *Accident of Fate* we got the first hand record of much darker ages from 1938 to 1945, that Rochlitz survived by pure chance as he insists. Very convincingly, after one discovers that in these few years Rochlitz was imprisoned several times; digged mass graves in Jasenovac death camp and fought along and escaped Partisans. It is not however Rochlitz's tribulations that distinguish this book but his somber observations and nonbiased perspective. As a foreign Jew Rochlitz is an outsider but being young, having learnt the language and in possession of amiable character Imre easily became Yugoslav Mirko. This peculiar double-sidedness gives Rochlitz's memoir precious significance for the historiography of Yugoslavia's wartime fratricide.

Born in Budapest in 1925, Imre Rochlitz grew up in a relatively poor but well integrated Viennese family. His carefree childhood and dreams of becoming an actor are abruptly interrupted after the Anschluss. With his Hungarian passport still valid for one month Imre tries and with a bit of luck makes an escape to relatives in Zagreb. Their relative calm was short lasting. After the destruction of Yugoslavia and the establishment of Ustashe state of Croatia in April 1941, the family was on the run again. Even though the youngest, Imre was the first to end up in Ustashe death camp of Jasenovac at the age of 17. Starved and frozen he was tortured, utterly dehumanised and like any other camp inmate only awaited death as a relief. But then in yet another "accident of fate" Imre was released upon the intervention of none the other but the Nazi Plenipotentiary General for Croatia Edmund von Glaise-Horstenau after the intercession of one of Imre's uncles who was an Austrian World War One veteran. Aided by fake documents Rochlitz then escapes to Italian occupied Dalmatia. Interned in Kraljevica and on Rab island he encounters and cherishes time with many of still surviving Yugoslav Jews. However, this Italian prison paradise disappears with the Italian capitulation in 1943 and with the remains of his family Imre flees to Partisan liberated territories. Being young and able-bodied he is enlisted and soon even given a lieutenant rank though he spent most of his time in a makeshift Partisan veterinarian hospital. But besides a common enemy Rochlitz shared little with the Partisans and felt uncomfortable in their "terrain of suspicion, paranoia, and arbitrary justice." (p. 141) In the final accident of fate Rochlitz flees to Bari, Italy but not before participating in numerous rescues of allied pilots and war action in Kordun, part of mountainous Krajina region of Croatia (the list of pilots is in the appendix).

For Pawel and many skeptical readers autobiography is a "blend of fact and fiction that reveals by concealment and conceals by revelation." The value of Imre Rochlitz's memoir is that it does not conceal the usual. Thus, we find rare and rather unpleasant descriptions of how biological needs were tended to in death transports and camps or of hygiene during prolonged guerilla resistance. Then there is very vivid description and scrutiny of sex life and among the Partisans or lack thereof, which is still a taboo for Yugoslav veterans and controversial subject in historiography. Equally valuable are Rochlitz's stories of how food was procured and provisioned, everyday shores and pastimes as well as about entertainment in war situations. Finally, he provides testimonies on how

Partisans perceived Jews, how they treated dissent and Otherness and how they navigated between allies and enemies to come out as sole victors though at a high price.

All along Rochlitz is shrewd, incisive and very critical observer. He spares no harsh word for his own Jewish upbringing in Vienna, in this most famous of all Jewish communities but riddled with tensions, disunity and vanity. Once in Croatia Rochlitz is full of disdain in depicting murderous and sickening Ustasas and then the brutal Partisans. Drunken British envoys also get their share. Only Americans get away easily if one discards the tale of his friend in Bari, Junius Scales, later sentenced to six year's imprisonment as the first-and-only American ever convicted simply for being a Party member. Most importantly, Rochlitz uses every occasion to express his gratitude for Italian officers' and administration refusal to comply with German plans for "Final solution" and eventual rescue of many Yugoslav (and Greek and some French) Jews. This was already the topic of his son's film, *the Righteous Enemy*, where Imre's story loomed large.

Imre's son Joseph also helped with the book that impresses with tediousness in historical detail, meticulous research and contextualization to warrant any lapses in memory as well as authentic photos, reprints of original documents and maps. This is a book both for scholars and general public, especially the young generations that find the horrors of Holocaust so difficult to imagine. While gruff at times Rochlitz's recollections are never ill-hearted. Behind his criticism we find a deep, unchallenged humanity and inspiring passion for life.