

Force. Nine of them survived the war. Laskin conducted dozens of interviews including with two surviving veterans, 106 and 110 years old, and collected family and regimental histories, military records, and historical archives. He has a taste for detail, both military and personal, and is particularly good at drawing parallels and contrasts between the polyglot AEF in which familiarity broke down barriers between people, and war-ravaged Europe where it seemed to have the opposite effect. Further, this group of twelve allows Laskin to explore different facets of the immigrant experience without relying on stereotypes: the Jewish junk dealer, the Norwegian bachelor farmer, and the Italian peasant boy had very different lives, both in their home countries and in this one.

Apart from all the death and destruction the war caused—described here in great detail—Laskin's main point is that the war very successfully helped the immigrants who served to integrate into American society. That was not an easy task. The men in one New York division spoke forty-three languages, and officers sometimes had to mime what they were trying to get the men to do. As one native-born soldier wrote in a letter home, "I think it is about the finest thing in the world for anyone, who like myself, has always suffered with race prejudice, to be mixed up in an outfit like this. The last six months of my life in the army, living and suffering with these fellows, has done more for me to get rid of race prejudice than anything else could have done."

The two Polish soldiers provide very interesting biographies. I briefly mention one. Joe Chmielewski's brother, Frank, migrated from the Russian Partition, otherwise known as Congress Poland, to South Fork, Pennsylvania in 1907. Frank worked at the Argyle Coal Company and quickly became a leader of the Polish community and the Catholic parish, St. Anthony's. His younger brother, Joe, arrived in 1912 and quickly found work in the mine, but unlike Frank, he did not find it very rewarding. Frank and Joe learned of the war in 1914 through their local Polish language newspaper, *Naród Polski*: "Battle on Polish Lands" read the headline of the September 2 issue. The complicated political situation in Poland left the

two brothers and other Poles living in America confused. Whose side should they take? What outcome is best for Poland? As Laskin put it, "Of all the newly arrived immigrants, the Poles were the first to grasp that the war in Europe was their war too." In 1917 Joe Chmielewski was young and restless, and his work in the mines and steel mills in Pennsylvania provided little satisfaction. He enlisted in the U.S. Army and was assigned to the 16<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Battalion in Georgia. Joe saw no action with that battalion, but served two years in the army until his honorable discharge in 1919. Unlike his older brother, Frank, and other Polish immigrants who had deep roots in and commitment to their Polish and Catholic world and their families, Joe became a drifter. He worked at various jobs in Michigan, Minnesota, and Illinois. The message seems to be that whether Polish, Jewish, Irish, or American, we get our meaning for life from the communities to which we belong.

*The Long Way Home* is a good read, especially since it instructs us about foreign-born soldiers whose service to America shines.

## In Paradise

**By Peter Matthiessen.** New York: Riverhead Books (riverheadbooks.com), 2014. 256 pages. ISBN: 1594633177.

### John Guzłowski

For a book that hopes to be a serious novel about the Holocaust by a very serious and much admired and awarded writer (three time National Book Award winner), this is a surprisingly silly book. The novel follows Clements Olin, a respected Polish-American scholar of Holocaust literature as he goes to Auschwitz to do research on Tadeusz Borowski, the author of one of the great memoirs about this German death camp, and to consider his own roots as a Pole and an American. Set in Kraków, Auschwitz, and Oświęcim and ranging in time between Poland's World War II history and its postcommunist years, this is the kind of novel that should be of interest to Central Europe specialists. *In*

*Paradise*, however, quickly loses direction as Clements Olin joins a retreat at Auschwitz with 140 other retreatants: Zen enthusiasts, rabbis, priests, nuns, writers, tourists, artists, and survivors.

What comes next reads like a Facebook discussion of the Holocaust and World War II Poland. The retreat participants throw around sound-bite statements about the Holocaust, about who was guilty and how they were guilty and what should have been done and who is still responsible and why we should care and why we shouldn't care, and on and on. And then these characters disappear and other characters come on to make and unmake their own sound-bite points. I kept feeling that I should be taking frequent and extensive notes, and then I realized that it would not do me much good because probably that is how Peter Matthiessen got into this mess of a novel, by taking too many notes during his own three Zen retreats at Auschwitz.

But that's not all that is going on in the novel. There is also an absurd love plot between Olin and a woman preparing to become a nun, and a mysterious birth plot regarding Olin's origins straight out of Dickens. What begins as a thoughtful discussion of what it means to be Polish and American quickly dissolves into melodrama. Threaded through all this are ridiculous statements about Poles—the women have hairy armpits, all Poles drink too much and are snooty and pretentious, they and other Christians are responsible for the Holocaust.

Nothing can save this novel, certainly not the main character. He is moody, cranky, sexist, shallow, and lost. As a scholar, he seems completely unfocused. As a Polish American, he lacks any cultural identity. What he does and where he goes matters not at all. A reader would be better off reading one of the Polish writers who the main character says he has read in order to understand Poland, Auschwitz, and the Holocaust: Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska, or Tadeusz Borowski. There one will learn a little bit about the Holocaust and so much more. Not in Peter Matthiessen's sketchy book.

While reading the book I kept thinking that this is a clumsy novel, all in all, written by someone who appears too tired to write a serious

novel about the issues he wants to take up. And then I read the *New York Times* review of the book, and it appears that Matthiessen was not only tired, he was also apparently dying as he worked on *In Paradise*. As a result, it belongs to that genre of final novels by great writers who should have buried their final pages before they were no longer capable of doing so, writers like Vladimir Nabokov, David Foster Wallace, Ralph Ellison, and of course Ernest Hemingway.

### Letter to the Editor

The review of *Polish Hero Roman Rodziewicz: Fate of a Hubal Soldier in Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Postwar England* (SR, January 2015) mistakenly states that the books' Preface was written by the late Marcus Leuchter. Mr. Leuchter has only been quoted in a short statement, while the entire book including the Preface was written by myself.

Aleksandra Ziolkowska-Boehm, Wilmington, DE

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