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Beating the Odds: A Boyhood Under Nazi-Occupied France

By George M Burnell, MD

Review by Vincent J Felitti, MD

Beating the Odds is the autobiographical story of a Jewish adolescence spent in Nazi-occupied, World War II France. The author is former Hawaii Permanente Chief of Psychiatry, George Burnell, MD. Another of Dr Burnell's books, *Final Decisions*, was favorably reviewed in *The Permanente Journal's* Spring 1998 issue¹ and provided a broad, sensible look at end-of-life decisions by and for dying patients. Although *Final Decisions* and *Beating the Odds* describe lives at opposite ends of a lifetime, both books share a theme of people doing their best under conditions of mortal threat.

This highly readable book discusses survival in situations where people have lost most personal control over their lives. The story illustrates the long-term effects of losing key attachment figures during childhood and of unexpected salvation by others—and how those events have impact decades later. On a larger scale, the book is a firsthand commentary on the most societally significant event of the twentieth century and raises questions that are relevant even today. Speaking of the tragic political inaction that led to a more advanced German military position when the United States entered the war, Dr Burnell comments, "It was not just the politics of isolationism in America that was responsible for the inertia, but also the fact that the Western [European] countries were not interested in getting help from the United States."^{2:p32} Dr Burnell uses the same analysis for current events: "Again nations are debating, who should intervene? Whose problem is it? How much money, weapons, arms, soldiers can we spare? Why can't diplomacy resolve this problem?"^{2:p214} Although

the story of the Vichy government, Marshal Pétain of the French Resistance Movement, and Nazi collaborators in France will not be remembered firsthand by all readers of this book, the story is one in which we all are actors: The names change, but the same story has been repeated throughout human history and undoubtedly will be again. We must therefore now ask ourselves the same questions asked about World War II: When is a horrible situation *our* problem? At what point should *we* resist and fight? When is it too early and when is it too late to intervene?

In the course of recounting the early part of his life, Dr Burnell has described, on an individual level, the universal problems we all face. "I was a child playing with toys when the war started and [was] going on sixteen when it ended. Like thousands of French Jewish teenagers, my growing years were filled with episodes of fear and terror, which would remain dormant and buried inside for years to come."^{2:p350} Dr Burnell closes this in-

teresting book by finding in war an epigram for psychiatry: "In the end, I think it is truly a wonder of the human spirit that people, when thrown into pits of despair, can rise against all odds and create a life of hope and meaning."^{2:p355} ♦

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References

1. Rinaldi RE. "Final choices: to live or to die in an age of medical technology," by George M Burnell, MD: a book review. *Perm J* 1998 Spring;2(2):77.
2. Burnell GM. *Beating the odds: a boyhood under Nazi-occupied France*. Bloomington (IN): 1stBooks Library; 2002.

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