

SIMON, JOHN B. 2019. *STRANGERS IN A STRANGER LAND: HOW ONE COUNTRY'S JEWS FOUGHT AN UNWINNABLE WAR ALONGSIDE NAZI TROOPS... AND SURVIVED*. LANHAM, MARYLAND: HAMILTON BOOKS, ISBN: 978-0761871491, 473 PP. (PAPERBACK)

MARK BERNHEIM¹

¹ Miami University, College of Arts and Science, Department of English, 335 North Locust Street, Oxford, OH 45056, USA. ORCID: 0000-0002-5443-5419, Email: bernhema@miamioh.edu

This is a massive and ambitious work with an important aim in Jewish historical knowledge. At first thought, the idea of almost 500 pages on one of the smallest and newest Jewish communities in Europe, one that had neither deportations or casualties or roundups during the Shoah period, seems unlikely and quixotic. Finland is not a country extensively known for its Jewish traditions or population, even less so than Scandinavian or Baltic neighbors Sweden, Denmark, Lithuania, Latvia. Never more than 2000 Jews lived in Finland over the last two centuries since its separation from both Sweden and Russia as a dependent territory, and today the population is barely half of that, and diminishing. We know of no heroics or famous Jewish Finns, and the country does not usually figure on touristic itineraries for Jewish sites and culture.

Why then did author John B. Simon write almost 600 pages for a Finnish translated edition (called “The Impossible War”) in 2017, the centennial of the country’s actual independence, then in English published two years later at almost 500 pages without many of the original illustrations but still lavishly fitted with maps? Any echo of the famous sci fi novel “Stranger in a Strange Land” is false. Sixty years ago Robert Heinlein’s fantasy of alien life had a huge audience. But John Simon’s evocatively similar title is for a saga that has no real parallel in any story, real or imagined, Jewish or not. In an interview he explained he could not have used the term “a strange land” for Finnish readers lest they be offended. Why would Finns find Finland ‘strange’?

To begin, the handsomely printed hefty paperback is adorned on the cover with four Jewish soldiers looking anonymously like any second world war personnel. You might

guess almost any identity for them – British, Italian, American – but who would think Finnish? And as the subtitle further teases the riddle, these men “fought alongside Nazi troops.” so the mystery deepens. Twenty years ago independent scholar Bryan Rigg published “Hitler’s Jewish Soldiers,” also a comprehensive work detailing large numbers of men with (mixed) Jewish backgrounds who actually fought undetected in the Wehrmacht. But John Simon’s book is definitely something else.

Simon is an American Jew who has lived in Finland for four decades as a communications executive for the worldwide KONE elevator and people-mover company. He published one of the best-selling books in Finnish history, a biography of Pekka Herlin, the ultra-wealthy CEO of KONE, which uncovered a controversial personal history of the family. Around that time, in 2009, he also chanced upon the startling record of three openly Jewish soldiers, one a woman, who had been awarded (but declined) the coveted Iron Cross for their service rendered to the combined German/Finnish war effort against the Soviet Union in the bloody war launched in 1941 as part of Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa!

Apparently not one to shy from unknown territory, Simon devoted the next seven years to exhaustive research and interviewing in the Jewish community of Helsinki. Himself unobservant but with a strong interest in Jewish history, he was able to contact the last remaining Jewish soldiers of the 327 (23 perished) who had served in the Finnish army together with German troops invading Soviet territory along the Finnish-Russian border in the Karelian Isthmus leading to Hitler’s planned annihilation of Leningrad. He made contact with their families and descendants to gather the data on their service to the Finnish nation.

But at the same time, he made another startling discovery of how he felt compelled to tell the story. Not only would he provide a capsule history of Finland for readers unfamiliar with the remote country, but as he explained, he needed something much more personal and to him, meaningful. His solution is unique, and makes the book something of a challenge. In the Finnish edition, he found that most readers were interested solely in the wartime narrative. His innovative use of fictional characters mixed together with the actual history went largely unnoticed. Simon had used his extensive research to create three interlocked characters – Benjamin, Rachel, and David.

This trio are not actual Finnish Jews, but a sort of composite drawn from what he learned in his research about the development of the small community. Former drafted Jewish youth in the Czarist Army when Finland was part of imperial Russia, Jews originally settled in parts of today’s Finland but had no rights at all. Only after the Communist revolution did Finland gain separation, and in all of Europe, the small number in Finland were the last to gain citizenship. A proportion continued to speak Swedish but rank and file adopted Finnish characteristics. Soviet influence remained strong and the threat of a tactical invasion was constant.

War broke out in 1939 and continued on and off for years. The Finns held their own, helped by the patriotic Jewish soldiers, but when exhaustion and starvation threatened, Finnish leaders succumbed to the German desire to use Finland as a staging point for conquering the Soviets. Even today, Finns are uncomfortable remembering

German control of the country and their role as co-combattants until the Nazi regime collapsed. They were severely punished by the Soviets in the peace treaties ending the war in 1945.

Simon gives extensive detail of the actual Jewish personnel lauded and protected by the German army, but these three are totally distinct from the fictional saga he tells over hundreds of pages. In interview, he stated, “I felt I had to explore how it felt for the actual people of the community to have been so menaced by both sides.”

The book manages to achieve a comfortable balance of detailed Finnish history and the role Jews played in the new nation throughout the last century, along with a romantic triangle of the three fictitious characters whose lives represented the achievement of maintaining identity with a comfortable assimilation. Finland remains the only country in Europe where German soldiers did not kill any residents. And in the end the proportion of Finns who fought for Israel in the War for Independence of 1948 was the single highest proportionally of any country.

Simon makes the point of Finland being a ‘strange’ country sandwiched among three dominant powers during its history, and its Jewish citizens similarly fighting for acceptance and survival. His book intertwines in a highly original fashion these shared fates. You will not soon forget the photo of the makeshift field synagogue in the Finnish forest standing unmolested next to Nazi war lines!

Mark Bernheim
Oxford OH
24 October 2020

FUNDING: This research received no external funding.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: The author declares no conflict of interest.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Mark Bernheim is a Professor Emeritus from positions in Ohio and Italy, specializing in American Studies and Journalism.

OPEN ACCESS: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits any noncommercial use, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

ARTICLE HISTORY: Received 2020-11-16 / Accepted 2021-01-24

