

Escape from the Ghetto by John Carr (Golden Hare Books.)

Yellow Star Red Star by Agnes Kaposi (i2i Publishing)

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In 1940, Chaim Herszman was a 13-year-old Polish Jew living in Lodz, and Agnes Kaposi was a seven-year-old Jew in Hungary's second city, Debrecen. Agnes's father had lost his job for being both a socialist and a Jew, and Chaim often relied on his fair complexion and distinctly non-Jewish looks to get him out of trouble in the streets. His Jewish friends laughed and called him Yoisel, which is Jesus in Yiddish.

Six years later they were several decades older. They had seen things that no one should see, let alone a child, and had lost most of their friends and relatives. Agnes had been crammed into an Auschwitz-bound cattle truck, but her train, unlike the dozens of other that left Budapest at the same time, never reached its destination. It was diverted because some slave labour was required in Austria, and that is why she lived to become Dr Agnes Kaposi, a distinguished engineer, a Churchill Fellow and only the third woman to be elected to the Royal Academy of Engineering.

Chaim had killed a German guard who was about to kill his brother. He thought: "I'm a murderer. I'm a 13-year-old who has just killed a man. And not just any man - a member of the master race." He had to get away fast. It was the start of an extraordinary journey through Poland, Germany, and France, in which he was required to do more killing and to see a lot of death. Finally in Britain, he fought with the British army, eventually setting up an office equipment business and changing his name to Henry Carr.

This year, two extraordinary books come out of these experiences. They are straightforward, unsentimental, matter-of-fact, and they show, more clearly than anything else I have read, the horror of war and persecution.

Kaposi, now 88, offers unadorned factual information. She does not tell you that something is horrifying, or terrifying. She gives you the detail, and you know. She takes you inside that cattle truck, lets you settle in beside her and see what she saw. It contained 87 Jews and an oil drum with the top end sawn off, to serve as

a toilet, which you had to use in full view of all the others. The oil drum soon started to overflow, so Kaposi's mother produced a ladle she had providently packed, and her father, to whom the carriage looked for leadership, organized a rota to ladle out its contents through a small gap near the door. Because her father took the first duty himself, no one objected to taking their turn.

Only an engineer could have written the flat, precise passage in which Kaposi gives the calculations Adolph Eichmann must have made when he was given the task of ridding Hungary of its Jews: "Four trains over 51 days gave Eichmann $51 \times 4 = 204$ trains, each with 45 wagons, a total of $204 \times 45 = 9180$ wagons.... Excluding the Jews of Budapest, Eichmann must have estimated the number to be about 500,000, so transportation density would have been $500,000/9180 = 54.5$ Jews per wagon." In the event there were fewer trains than Eichmann had planned for, so there was a "transportation density of $500,000:5985 = 84$ Jews per wagon."

Henry Carr died in 1995 and *Escape from the Ghetto* is written in Henry's voice by his oldest son John Carr, a leading authority on children's use of the internet, from the notes he took while listening to his father. It's the flat, unadorned voice of the good thriller writer, and like a good thriller, the book is full of page turners. You are always on the edge of your seat, wondering how on earth he is going to get out of that one.

Both Henry Carr and Agnes Kaposi are terrifyingly clear-sighted about themselves, their friends, and those who were with them. It makes persecution no less dreadful – in fact, it makes it more dreadful – to recognise that those who are persecuted have human weaknesses as well as human strengths.

Kaposi recalls, with understanding but not with forgiveness, those who tried to engineer their own survival at the expense of others. Carr does not shrink from a dreadful story about himself. In occupied France, he had to listen to two Polish workers boasting about how they had hanged a Jew from a tree. He had to laugh, for he owed his survival to the fact that no one guessed he was himself a Jew. But later he told his boss that the two men were saying dreadful things about Germans. Four days later he found them dead on a scaffold.

The writing is light and self-deprecating, and neither of these books is undiluted misery. There are Carr's pre-war football matches, in which sometimes Jews, Poles and Germans all joined in, many of them fearful that their parents might find out how well the races were mixing. Kaposi recalls her grandmother making

strudel on Sunday morning – “a ritual, and great fun. She placed a ball of special dough in the precise middle of a white-cloth-covered round table. She stretched the dough gently to just beyond the table edge, carefully avoiding tears. The pastry had to cover the whole table evenly, the weight of its all-round overhang providing the final gentle pull...”

Carr’s book ends with the war. Kaposi’s, however, is more than a Holocaust memoir: it is an account of an extraordinary life. The end of the war brought peace of a kind, but also the dreary poverty and conformism of Stalinist Hungary, from which anti-Semitism had not been banished. And because nothing is ever simple, even the revolution of 1956 was not run entirely by the good guys, and there were anti-Semites among the revolutionaries too.

The defeat of the revolution brought the certainty that there was no secure, happy future to be had in Hungary, and in 1956 the opportunity came for Agnes and her husband Jancsi to leave. Their journey out of Hungary was almost as dangerous as her wartime experiences. Perhaps the nearest they came to disaster was while they were hiding in boxes in the back of a lorry. “A Soviet soldier mounted the lorry and bayoneted through a few of the boxes. He missed ours.”

And so at last to a new life in Britain. “We showed our gratitude to this wonderfully generous country by being loyal citizens. We worked hard, built our careers.” Hungary rejected her because she is a Jew, and now she rejects Hungary. She has, she says, experienced no discrimination in Britain against her either as a Jew or as a foreigner, but “I could write a whole book about systematic discrimination against me as a woman.”

Agnes Kaposi and John Carr, both of whom (disclosure coming) I know slightly, are secular Jews, atheists, and socialists. They do not write about great, soaring concepts, but about the grubby realities of persecution. But reading the two books together, one has a real sense of the hell we made of the whole of Europe, especially (but not only) for Jews. Poland, Hungary, Germany, France, Austria – there was nowhere safe to go. There was persecution and blood everywhere. A world that makes children go through what Chaim and Agnes experienced shames us all. And children are still growing up like that.

