

Agnes Kaposi, *Yellow Star-Red Star*, i2i Publishing 2020

Reviewed by Revd Bruce Thompson

Dr Agnes Kaposi's memoir is a significant and hugely welcome contribution to the growing list of Holocaust memoirs. This is so on all sorts of levels, not least, because she not only survived the Nazi onslaught on Jews in her native Hungary, but also the Soviet invasion and purge in 1956 and made her way to the UK. Hence the title of her memoir '*Yellow Star – Red Star*'. In addition, Agnes also went on to become a leading academic in a field that had been up until then, and for many years thereafter, a domain of men. She was only the third woman to become a Fellow of the Royal Academy of engineering.

Over the past twenty years, there has been a significant increase in the number of those willing to share their personal experience of the Holocaust. This was because so many recognised that time was limited and their lives were drawing to a close. Another reason in more recent times has been the recognition that antisemitism and other forms of prejudice have been on a frightening rise reminiscent of the 1930s. Therefore, having kept the darkness and the horror to themselves and to their sleep-disturbed nightmares, survivors began to tell their stories, often for the very first time.

Agnes began to give her account of her time under fascist rule, Nazi occupation, and incarceration in a concentration camp just two years ago following the death of her beloved husband of almost 70 years, János. Her story is truly remarkable and demands to be heard.

One of the remarkable features that helps set Agnes Kaposi's book apart from so many other titles that are on offer is the contextual contribution of Dr László Csósz. Csósz is the Senior Archivist of the National Archives in Hungary and a historian of the Holocaust. Interspersing Dr Kaposi's wonderfully detailed and comprehensive account of her experiences, Csósz provides the reader with the facts, figures and events from the larger landscape. This is more than a memoir then, reading it is an experience in its own right.

The book will not only be of interest to a student of the Holocaust, it also provides a fascinating insight into an often-overlooked world that was pretty well destroyed by the events of the Second World War. It also dispels some of the stereotypical views many allow themselves to hold having read the rather regrettably formulaic presentations some publishers produce.

A cursory glance at the shelves of any bookshop often gives us a narrow understand of the breadth of the Holocaust. Over the years, I have seen the themes of the books change. Today there are a significant number of titles with the term *Auschwitz* in them and, more than that, an increasing number of covers with blue and white stripes. There are reasons for this. Since it has become easier to visit Auschwitz Birkenau following the collapse of

communism, *Auschwitz* has become the term most readily identifiable term to describe the Holocaust. Consequently, publishers know that the term catches the eye of potential readers. In addition, algorithms enable computer search engines to recommend books with *Auschwitz* in the title.

There is of course a serious danger here. To those who fail to go beyond the best sellers, the Holocaust *is* Auschwitz. Not only is a sole focus on Auschwitz an incomplete view of what took place, it is 'safe' because most people can't imagine themselves perpetrating such a heinous crime. It can lead us to overlook the more common experience of contempt, prejudice and the type of violence that a greater number of people are more likely to commit. When we are truly honest about ourselves, we know that we too have the capacity to turn against our neighbours; we know we have the inclination to survive at all costs, including doing things we would have previously thought impossible. This is something we would prefer not to think about it too deeply. Reading about Auschwitz then is so much easier on our conscience than examining the evolving policies on ethnic minorities, the increasing restrictions on those whose beliefs differ to our own, the tendency to conform or the behaviour toward neighbours in difficult times.

Agnes Kaposi's family were not especially religious, Jewish yes, but pretty well secular and integrated into society. Such assimilation did not save them. Nor did it save a huge percentage of those who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. In this regard, *'Yellow Star – Red Star'*, tells of a 'regular' family caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. This could be so far for anyone whose identity gradually becomes a target for extremists. Her book tells of a measured descent into madness, a world with which we may not be entirely unfamiliar. That is why Agnes wrote the book, and it is why I commend it unreservedly.

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From January 2017 • 100 Years of the Holocaust

A memoir for our times

Book review
by Bruce Thompson

YELLOW STAR



Richard Goodwin's memoir, *Yellow Star*, is a gripping, well-written, and often heartbreaking account of his journey from a young boy in Hungary to a refugee in the United States. The book is a testament to the power of the human spirit and the resilience of the human soul. It is a story of survival, of hope, and of the search for a better life. The book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the Holocaust and the impact it has had on the world.

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Learning lessons from the past

Ahead of Holocaust Memorial Day, which is on January 27, Dr Agnes Kaposi talks to Bruce Thompson




Dr Agnes Kaposi, a Holocaust survivor, shares her experiences and the lessons learned from the past. She discusses the importance of remembering the victims and the need for education and awareness. She also talks about the impact of the Holocaust on her life and the world. Dr Kaposi is a powerful voice for justice and for the prevention of future atrocities.

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