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## *Beating the Odds: A Boyhood Under Nazi-Occupied France*

By George M Burnell, MD

Review by Vincent J Felitti, MD

**B**eating 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 issue<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2:p32</sup> 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?"<sup>2:p214</sup> 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."<sup>2:p350</sup> 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."<sup>2:p355</sup> ♦

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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.

**Vincent J Felitti, MD,** has been with the Southern California Permanente Medical Group since its opening in San Diego in the late 1960s.

Beating the Odds book. Read reviews from world's largest community for readers. The book is about what can happen when the international community ignore... Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "Beating the Odds: A Boyhood Under Nazi-Occupied France" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving... Want to Read. For instance, life in occupied France was very different from life in Poland under German occupation, which was different than the experiences of Norway or the Balkans. There were, however, some consistencies: food shortages, rape committed by German soldiers, the persecution of Jews, shipping Jews who weren't killed on the spot to concentration camps, and random acts of senseless violence. Yet not every city or country with a major Nazi presence faced such bleak conditions. The German high command respected Paris as a center of culture and society and sought to use it as a massive luxury Paris through a Nazi's lens: Propaganda pictures of Occupied France taken by photographer ordered to prove city was thriving under German rule. Andre Zucca's images of Paris in the Second World War have remained controversial. Appear to show Parisians carefree and jubilant under Nazi occupation and Vichy rule. At first glance, these photographs appear to show a Paris that flourished under four years of Nazi occupation during the Second World War. Controversial: Andre Zucca's series of photographs, such as these young women posing in unusual sunglasses, showed Parisians enjoying life under German rule. Carefree: The series is filled with fashionable women wearing stylish outfits and applying make-up, in stark contrast to hardships commonly associated with Nazi rule. Beating the odds by George M. Burnell, 2002, 1st Books edition, in English. Beating the odds. a boyhood under Nazi-occupied France. by George M. Burnell. Published 2002 by 1st Books in Bloomington, IN . Written in English. Subjects. History, Personal narratives. Places.