



The Search for Johnny Nicholas: The Secret of Nazi Prisoner No. 44451

David C. Smith

Hugh Wray McCann

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Jean Marcel Nicholas, or Johnny Nicholas, left a haze of contradictory stories behind him. What's known for certain is that he was born in Haiti in 1918, arrested by the Gestapo in Paris in 1943, and served as a slave laborer and then a doctor in the infamous Dora concentration camp (where Hitler built his V-2 rockets). Wasted by dysentery, infected by tuberculosis contracted from his prisoner patients and wounded trying to escape, Nicholas was rescued by American troops but died of TB three months after the war ended. But what Nicholas led others to believe is another matter. American fighter pilot, French resistance agent, doctor, movie producer—he tried on all of these roles so convincingly that no one, from his family to the Nazis, knew who he really was.

Troublemaker, hero, fool, the man is a mystery—a mystery now elucidated by journalists Hugh Wray McCann and David C. Smith. Readers of Holocaust and African diaspora studies will welcome *The Search for Johnny Nicholas* (a revision of a work published to limited UK release in 1982) for investigating a small but fascinating corner of history.

In a twisting narrative written in an almost thriller-like style, McCann and Smith weave between Nicholas's troubled Haitian adolescence, his brief adventures in the pre-war cosmopolitan high life, and his concentration camp ordeal. Nicholas's sheer unlikelihood may get readers to open the book, but it's his personality that accounts for lasting interest. Strong-willed and ambitious, quick-witted and mischievous, Nicholas risked his life to get medical care for fellow inmates—but also to go skinny-dipping.

McCann and Smith have tracked down hundreds of sources to assemble this enigma's story. (Tantalizingly, Nicholas dictated his own history, but this document has never been found.) At least, McCann and Smith have assembled what they can, because many questions remain—whether Nicholas was a conman, an opportunist, or a Resistance fighter, what the Nazis believed about him, how he escaped Gardelegen, and more.

It's the questions, though, the sheer puzzle, that will keep readers engaged. McCann and Smith don't always realize this. They fill in gaps in the story with guesses and try to get inside Nicholas's head, frequently writing phrases like "Nicholas would have guessed" and "Nicholas would have found himself," etc. Larger than life, full of stories and lies, Nicholas isn't easy to understand, and McCann and Smith's impersonation doesn't convince. It's always a relief to turn from this speculation to actual evidence, to the testimony of those who knew Nicholas, which this volume is fortunately rich in.

McCann and Smith get it right with their title: the search is what compels us. Whatever Nicholas was, what made him do what he did, we can't know now, and this mountain of evidence, sometimes contradictory, always partial, assembled around the central absence of the man himself, poignantly brings home the loss and crime of his death.

LIGHTSEY DARST (August 16, 2011)

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