WWII + VI: A Kid’s Memories of War and Postwar

Johan Zwaan
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WWII + VI is a pleasing memoir that combines world events with personalized accounts of surviving the war.

Johan Zwaan's memoir WWII + VI focuses on his early childhood experiences of the war and its aftermath in the Netherlands.

Zwaan was five years old when Germany invaded Holland in 1940. His book is deft in combining stories of the invasion that were shared with him later with his own memories; historical research regarding the impact of the war on his hometown also plays in. Zwaan recalls fear related to the Germans alongside clear depictions of Gorinchem and daily life in it.

The hardships brought on by war are a point of focus, including shortages of necessary goods and the horrible treatment of Jewish citizens in the city. Zwaan’s father was a physician, and Zwaan details the role he played in resisting German occupation. Grim realities alternate with accounts of the hopeful actions of brave resistors and moments of happiness and normalcy, as when the Zwaan and his siblings decide that “only a boy will do” when their mother is expecting a child.

A loose chronological progression brings the accounts together, while clear chapter titles, headings, and subheadings help when it comes to following the story. Still, the text jumps between events, and there’s some summation involved. Photographs help when it comes to maintaining focus on the Zwann family, though some of the book’s included material, including a detailed, multicentury history of Gorinchem, are out of place.

Extensive descriptions of the organizations that formed in support of Germany, as well as of those that represented a resistance to German forces, help to clarify elements of the book, especially where they connect to the Zwaan family and to Zwaan’s father’s experiences in Amersfoort prison for civil disobedience. Nevertheless, the work is heavy with jargon, and its paragraphs run long. Non-ornamental word choices characterize its work, with the occasional interjection of gentle humor.

The people around whom Zwaan grew up come alive in his text, including, but not limited to, his brothers and his parents. He captures their revealing behaviors well, as when a neighbor told Zwaan’s mother that her children had been misbehaving; Zwaan’s mother thanked them for calling and did not rebuke her children, preferring their independence. A touching conclusion memorializes the elder Zwaans.

Pleasing as it combines world events with its personalized accounts of surviving the war, WWII + VI is a familiar, meaningful, and sometimes humorous memoir.

LAURA LEAVITT (June 2, 2020)
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