



Test of Courage: The Michel Thomas Story

Christopher Robbins

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The story of Michel Thomas reads like a thriller in which adventure and heartbreak combine to produce a unique form of wisdom. Boldly escaping Vienna after the Anschluss, having refused to make accommodations for being Jewish, he arrived stateless in France one week before Kristallnacht. But rather than let this most precarious of positions defeat him, Thomas began to fight what was to become a fantastic and ultimately heroic personal war against the forces of barbarism that engulfed his world.

Arrested by Vichy France, Thomas was starved for two years in a concentration camp at the foot of the Pyrénées and forced into slave labor in a coal mine in Provence. He avoided being sent to Auschwitz by hiding within the confines of a deportation camp for six weeks as its infuriated masters took increasingly dramatic action to capture him at all costs -- and ultimately to no avail. He then joined the secret army of the Resistance and during one mission was captured and interrogated by Klaus Barbie, Butcher of Lyons, whom he barely deceived into releasing him. Re-arrested by the French Milice (Gestapo) and tortured, Thomas held out by entering a psychological state in which he no longer registered pain, and after six and a half hours his defeated tormentors threw him into a cell. He survived and promptly rejoined the fight. After the Allies liberated France, he joined the American forces, fought his way into Germany in active service and was with the troops that liberated Dachau. There he caught, interrogated and obtained the handwritten confession of the head of the camp's crematoria, known as the "Hangman of Dachau."

At the end of the war Thomas became a highly unorthodox and extraordinarily effective Nazi hunter. As an officer with American counterintelligence, but largely as an unprecedented independent force, he masterminded and executed an ingenious scheme to infiltrate and expose underground networks of diehard SS men by posing as a mythical Nazi purportedly hand-chosen by Martin Bormann to organize the rise of a Fourth Reich.

Though his entire family had been slaughtered in Auschwitz, and many close friends killed in combat, at the cessation of hostilities Thomas staged a Reconciliation Concert. Using German musicians, and in direct defiance of strict Allied non-fraternization laws, he brought friend and foe together in a belief that there had to be a different and better future -- and that individuals had the power to make it happen.

Christopher Robbins has dug deep to explore and substantiate the details of the Michel Thomas story. He has authenticated every episode through camp records, Vichy documents, Resistance papers and U.S. Army reports as well as with hundreds of hours of interviews with the man himself. Today, Michel Thomas teaches languages to inner-city kids, movie stars and heads of industry, succeeding in a matter of days even with people who consider themselves hopeless as linguists. To those who have been taught by him, he seems to have a magical gift for unlocking the secret powers of the mind. In Test of Courage we are led through the extraordinary experiences that have shaped the profound insight of this most fascinating and complex man, whose story is one of the most inspirational of the century.



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