



The Test of Courage: Michel Thomas

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. Until his death in 2005, he taught languages to ghetto kids, heads of industry and movie stars in a matter of days, succeeding even with people who considered themselves hopeless linguists. To those who have been taught by him, he seemed to be a miracle worker with a magical gift for unlocking the secret powers of the mind.

This unique understanding was gained under extreme circumstances. Stateless in Vichy France at the beginning of the Second World War, he was incarcerated and starved in a concentration camp at the foot of the Pyrenees. Forced into slave labour in a coal mine in Provence, he avoided being sent to Auschwitz by hiding within the confines of a deportation camp for six weeks.

He escaped death to join the Secret Army of the Resistance. He was arrested and interrogated by Klaus Barbie, Butcher of Lyon, whom he deceived into releasing him, and was later re-arrested by the French Gestapo and tortured. He held out by entering a psychological state in which he no longer registered pain and after six hours of torture, his tormentors threw him into a cell and he survived to re-join the Resistance. After the Allies invaded France he joined the American forces, fought his way into Germany and was with the troops who liberated Dachau. He personally interrogated the camp's hangman and oversaw his handwritten confession.

At the end of the war he became a Nazi-hunter. Working for American Counter Intelligence he posed as a Nazi himself to infiltrate and expose underground networks of SS men dedicated to the return of a Fourth Reich.

In spite of the fact that his entire family had been murdered in Auschwitz, and many close friends killed in combat, at the very end of the war he staged an elaborate gala evening in Munich which he called a Reconciliation Concert. Using German musicians, and in defiance of strict Allied non-fraternisation laws, he brought friend and foe together in the belief that there had to be a different and better future.

Author 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, US Army reports and hundreds of hours of interviews with this extraordinary man. The result is one of the most inspirational stories of the 20th century.

The Test of Courage: Michel Thomas Details

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Harvey Heilbrun says

This was an incredible book. Having successfully learned some French using Michel Thomas's Learn a language CDs, I was fascinated to learn more about him. His life from pre-World War II to his language courses is inspiring. It taught me a lot more than I wanted to know about World War II, the Holocaust, and the political machinations throughout the war and after. It is quite depressing on a moral level. How the LA Times and the courts treated and reacted to Michel Thomas's experiences following the publishing of this book was abominable. This is a must read.

Carla Perry says

This book deals heavily with the Resistance movement in France, the Vichy Regime, and the broader picture of World War II. It's a first-person account of a heroic, but flawed man who fought and survived the Nazi extermination efforts by becoming a Resistance fighter. A very moving and readable story that filled in a great deal of the history of France's involvement in the war. The United States does not come off looking particularly good. On page 13, he writes: "I was taught that if you don't need help yourself, then you must give help to others — a principle that left a deep impression." A surprising book.

Metrodorus says

This is a controversial book, attacked by some critics as a work of fiction, whilst lauded by many others.

Personally, I am undecided. Michel Thomas had a bent for self-promotion and clearly exaggerated at times. If that were the only problem, I would skirt over it, but it could suggest further veracity issues.

Large tracts are given over to the progression of the war in general, accounts of which are available in any WWII history book instead of focusing on what Michel was doing during the time and this seems odd. This makes it more difficult to see a coherent chronological account which could be more easily examined.

His escapades are absolutely astonishing to read about and the probability of his having survived must be staggeringly small. Yet, judging by his success later in life, he was clearly an exceptionally capable man, so perhaps the biography is true.

I am reluctant to fuel the criticism of someone who is no longer around to defend himself, but if I must come down on one side of the fence, I would say that this book lacks a ring of truth.

Cary says

This is a controversial biography. Michel died recently, but was in later years a remarkable language teacher who tried to revolutionise the educational system and met with great resistance, partly because his method placed so much responsibility on teachers and they didn't want the burden. You may have come across his recorded language courses on Amazon or in bookshops - they are wonderful and genuinely effective.

This book extends further back though, detailing an amazing life in which he slipped from country to country during the second world war in order to survive. He was placed in camps and was interrogated by the notorious Nazi Klaus Barbie.

In addition to being about determination to survive, the book also reveals so much about war criminals being given new identities, having their war records erased and even being given passage to new lives or being placed back into seats of power almost immediately despite horrendous acts, simply because Allied nations, for all their ideals, chose to profit in every way possible - America in particular.

Later chapters also intrigue as Michel moved to Hollywood and taught such stars as Woody Allen, Yves Montand and Grace Kelly - whose husband also happened to put an end to a wonderful scheme to create an 'international island' for the greatest thinkers alive to solve world issues, intended to be off the coast of Monaco. Ranier instead opted for a gambling resort.

Overall, a thoroughly engrossing, informative and inspiring read, despite the fact that I previously had an aversion to reading material on this dark period in history. Many may have died, yet the book still conveys the potential towards which we can all reach.

Klr says

Dramatic story

of a resistance fighter during World War II. He survived horrible treatment and fought back. It's fascinating and heart-breaking. It doesn't hide the barbarous cruelty and dehumanizing work of the Nazis but doesn't spare the atrocities of the French collaboration and the U.S.'s complicity in holding up visas and saving Nazi war criminals.

Sandra says

I found this book to be an incredible account of a Polish-born Jew who found himself in France at the onset of World War II. I've always been fascinated with World War II and this story renewed in me the strength of human spirit. I'm amazed at how strong the will to survive is present in some people and the lengths they go.

Michel Thomas was a extrovert Jew living in France at the time that Nazi-Germany was gaining control over the country. He's rounded up in and sent to labor camps within the borders of France. What ensues is truly a tale of heroism. He evades being deported to various concentration camps by hiding. He eventually escapes and joins up with the French Resistance working to undermine Hitler's reign.

Through various contacts and luck, he joins up with the U.S. to help defeat the Nazis. He's assigned to a

particular decorated group, the Thunderbirds. He saw combat and then was reassigned to the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC). While serving in this position, he drove down to meet up with the troops assigned to liberate Dachau. It's a particularly haunting description that Thomas recounts.

Throughout the book, stories of the immense inhumanity encountered linger and sicken the reader.

Postwar, Thomas becomes a Nazi Hunter and rounds up the most wanted Nazi's using controversial and unconventional methods. He was notorious for sniffing out the liar and bringing forth the truth.

Hardened by the effect the war had on him, Thomas leaves Europe to set up residency in America. Here, he develops a revolutionary teaching method that never quite takes off within the academic circle, though he is considered a genius among his mostly celebrity clientele.

At some point I became skeptical of the man himself. I couldn't quite believe that one person could do all this--evading SS officers, crossing enemy lines, hunting down Nazi officers, finding the entire Nazi Party file at a paper mill awaiting to be destroyed--but I kept reading. I was entranced with the tale woven between the pages. My skepticism was put to rest in the final chapter when the author, debunking an article written by The Times after the publishing of this book under a different title, challenges the article's assertion that Thomas is a fake by providing documents and eyewitness accounts of Thomas' service. The pure documentation is overwhelming and lays all sense of disbelief in the grave.

I would definitely recommend this as a must-read for every reader. The historical aspects within the book are truly awe inspiring. In a culture where many concepts are skimmed over--we all know about the Holocaust, D-Day, and Pearl Harbor, but that's about our extent of knowledge concerning World War II--it was incredibly beneficial to read about how France got to that position in the first place. Having read little about the French Resistance, and having a skewed "American" viewpoint on the French in general, I found this book to be very educational regarding the French during World War II.

Antonios says

Although not of great literary value, as a story it is definitely interesting, fast paced and worth reading. The biggest part is the story of World War 2 and post-war Germany and US through the eyes of Michel Thomas. An amazing memoir from the famous teacher, who gets revealed as being so much more, who has witnessed and endured so much more, that it is sometimes hard to believe.

For those not very knowledgeable on the details of the war it will also act as a great introduction to the outbreak of WWII, Vichy France, the Italian campaign and the denazification of Germany, as well as the prosecutions that followed in the US.

It is a great story, even for those not familiar with Thomas and his work. The details given are sometimes overwhelming, but one will be tempted to follow the bibliographical references and footnotes. At other times one will question the very validity of some of the statements. The author, Christopher Robbins, goes to great lengths to back up and cross reference any claims, if possible. 'Le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vrai semblable'. The final chapter on the LA times libel comes as a shock and makes this work all the most important.

Initially I expected much more on Thomas' language method and its educational merits, but I was pleasantly surprised to discover what little significance it carries, in contrast to his wartime experience and post war judicial efforts; what Robbins and Thomas chose to focus on instead. You cannot avoid feeling awe at a life

triumphant and meaningful, a life inspiring and intriguing.

In the end you are not only treated to a great life story, but you end up with more insight into this amazing polyglot and war hero than many of his contemporaries and friends ever had. The voice behind the famous tapes now gets a heart, a mind, a background, but mostly you get a glimpse at some of his scars, his passions and his ideals.

Carolyn says

Am not quite sure how to take this book, Michel comes across as self-righteous and convinced that he's a ladies man. Shame the author wrote the main part of the book about WW2, which undoubtedly is an important part in Michel's life, but I would've liked to read more about the 50+ years afterwards. Have a look at <http://michelthomas.org/> if you doubt the stories.

Annie says

I should have read the reviews before I downloaded this book. Much of it seemed grandiose and self-aggrandizing. Maybe it was true, but it's certainly hard to believe.

This is one of the very few books that I did not finish. I always try to finish a book whether or not I'm taken with it or not - you never know - there might be something wonderful further on. I complained about this so much as I progressed it that my husband asked me to please stop reading it. Of course, I didn't do this right away - but it wasn't much later that I stopped.

Tammy Swartzendruber jata says

There are no words

I have read many memoirs of people who lived through the holocaust, but never have I read anything like this. Michel's courage is beyond comprehension! To walk out of a prison camp and then voluntarily return that evening, because he discovers his "pass" was brought about by dishonorable means- what is there to say? Michel would sooner be tortured in camp than to live a free man with that knowledge hanging over him the rest of his life. This book is filled with these kinds of amazing stories. I recommend this book to everyone.

Randy says

I really enjoyed this book. The firsthand stories about the resistance fighters were the most fascinating part. Michael Thomas is clearly a very intelligent man. The book mentions language schools that he helped pioneer in California. The book makes me want to enroll. It is a shame that no other schools adopted his system earlier. The book also makes you think about how Americans are just stabbing ourselves in the foot by not stressing the importance of foreign language skills at a younger age.

Bootheryan says

How could the biography of a Polish Jew who survived a Vichy concentration camp, fought in the French Resistance, worked for the Americans in counterintelligence and eventually became one of the highest paid language tutors in the world be a bad read? The book is a little padded with information about WWII that Thomas did not actually live but that is totally relevant to the overall story of his life. I also would have liked to have heard a little bit more about how he learned his languages and which ones he actually knew but these things are quibbles really. This is an extraordinary story that definitely deserved to be told. If you enjoy reading about WWII or are already a Michel Thomas fan then you will enjoy this book.

Scott Meneely says

Courage Beyond Words was a book that left such an impact on me that it made me want to cry, yet I didn't want it to end. The life story of Michel Thomas is a wild rollercoaster ride of excitement and a great example of what one person can do to stand up against horrible evils. I wanted to read this book to learn more about Michel Thomas' teaching methods but came away with so much more!

Thomas, who fled Nazi Germany to France and escaped from a concentration camp to join the French resistance was eventually brought into the United States Army. He was present at the liberation of Dachau and negatives of the photos he took at the liberation are at the holocaust museum today.

After the war had finished Thomas was employed by the CIC, which was the predicesor to the CIA. He obtained confessions of notorious Nazi war criminas. After several years his service record gained him entrance in the United States as a civillian.

In the States Thomas would found his language learning system and take on the academic establishment to change the way languages are taught. Academia was too set in its ways and despite evidence of his methods effectiveness little change would result. The Language Master, a BBC documentary recorded Michel teaching a group of school children good grammatical French in a week.

Michel Thomas is so much more than just a language teacher, and this biography recognises him as such. He was awarded the Silver Star more than 60 years after the second world war was over. Thomas passed away in 2005 but lives on in his language courses and in the justice that he helped to bring to the victims of the holocaust.

Sagar Jethani says

What an incredible life. When he wasn't hanging out with his neighbor, H.G. Wells, or having his girlfriend painted by Matisse, Michel Thomas was orchestrating the French Resistance. Slipping across war-torn borders, being arrested and tortured by the Gestapo, and escaping from concentration camps makes this book hard to put down. Through it all, Thomas retained a strong sense of humanity, never succumbing to the temptation of exacting vengeance upon those who had murdered his family.

If, like me, you know Thomas primarily as an instructor of language, prepare to be floored by his story. I

wish I had known it sooner.

Alisa Zingerman says

As literature - the narration is weak sometimes, too short when it should be long and too long when it should be short... In any case, this is a story that had to be told, and I do feel deep gratitude to the author for the immense research he did. It is an inspiring and edifying book, in spite of its literary shortcomings. A good literature has an "aftertaste", it makes you live its story long after it is over. This historical testimony makes you recall it for other reasons, for the evidence it lays in front of you, and my thoughts keep coming back it. It's a book that was worth writing, worth reading, and a life that was worth being told about.
