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Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime

Kenneth I. Helphand



With great sympathy for his subjects, the landscape architect Kenneth I. Helphand, in *Defiant Gardens; Making Gardens in Wartime*, vividly describes the privations suffered by soldiers and imprisoned or interned civilians in wartime. He does so in order to point out the origins, assets, and ironies of the most expressive countermeasure taken by these stalwart individuals—the garden—grown on blasted battlefields, in barren ghettos, among squalid prisoner-of-war barracks, and in arid internment camps.

The title belies the humanity of the gardens' makers and the spirit of the gardens themselves. Not just defiant statements or demonstrations of anger, these frequently meager, tenderly tended plots are representations of life, evocations of home, the result of constructive labor, expressions of hope, works of art, and, above all, mechanisms for physical and emotional survival. They are also places and symbols of peace.

Defiant Gardens (published in 2006 by Trinity University Press) will be a revelation to those who don't know about such gardens and an affirmation for those who do. Written for both the general public and an academic audience, this humane and scholarly synthesis depicts the corporeal and the spiritual with equal insight. It simul-

taneously elucidates history, speaks to the present, and addresses universal themes. And although Helphand claims it is not a political statement, it is nonetheless a well-timed treatise on an age-old response to man's inhumanity to man.

In presenting the book with a research award, the jury noted that it represents an area of landscape study that has never been completely documented. They were equally impressed by the moving and difficult quality of the material and the testimony to life illustrated in its case studies.

Inspiration

A professor of landscape architecture at the University of Oregon, where he has taught courses in history, theory, and design since 1974, Helphand has always been interested in what gives gardens meaning—in gardens as the grand metaphor of landscape architecture.

This book, however, had a specific inspiration: an undated stereopticon photograph he found in an antiques store, showing French soldiers in a trench during World War I flanked by their planting beds. Helphand immediately grasped its importance—the contrast between the horrors soldiers suffered in the war and their gardens. But

his exploration of this insight did not start immediately, and when he did take it up, it did not advance evenly.

For years Helphand kept the picture propped up on his bookshelf. Though he lectured on garden images and ideals—paradise and so on—he did not have a name for situations that were not ideal. Finally, the word “defiant” came to him, and “stuck.” With this concept in mind, he began pursuing the subject in a formal way in 2003. With the photograph as a catalyst, he expanded his research to gardens grown in other difficult circumstances.

In 1997, he presented a paper, essentially the book’s first chapter, in Britain, at a comparative literature conference whose theme was gardens (that paper was later published in the *Journal of Garden History*). But after this, he became involved in writing another book, *Dreaming Gardens: Landscape Architecture and the Making of Modern Israel*. He also taught in Israel, and traveled.

Throughout this period, the defiant garden idea continued to “fester,” he says. Then, just as he was beginning to think seriously about writing a book on it, he met Barbara Ras, an editor who attended a talk he gave on the subject in Nevada. She suggested they collaborate on the project. He accepted her proposal and devoted his sabbatical, from 2003 to 2004, to giving its research and writing his full attention. The result is the seven chapters that make up the present volume.

The book begins with “War and Gardens,” in which Helphand explores gardens’ peacetime cultural properties and introduces the ways these become both exaggerated and diminished in wartime. He defines the defiant garden:

Gardens—even individual plants growing in bits of soil—in deserts, prisons, hospitals, highway medians, vacant lots, refugee camps, rooftops, dumps, wastelands, cracks in the sidewalk: these are examples of what I call defiant gardens, gardens created in extreme or difficult environmental, social, political, economic, or cultural conditions.

From here Helphand discourses on the word “garden,” explaining that it is both a verb and a noun. “The activity can carry equal, or even greater meaning and significance than the place itself,” he writes. In many ways the battlefield is the antithesis of the garden, and the will to garden during war can be read as an attempt to restore a sense of order to a world gone mad.

The following four chapters present the bulk of Helphand’s historical research. Chapter two describes the trench gardens of the Western Front in World War I. Chapter three advances in time to a revelatory discussion

of ghetto gardens in World War II. Chapter four addresses what he calls the “barbed-wire” gardens, grown by prisoners in Europe and Asia during both world wars. Chapter five treats the “stone gardens” of Japanese-American internment camps.

By letting many of the gardeners speak for themselves, in quotations from archives, diaries, interviews, memoirs and testimonies, Helphand underscores their resilience and resourcefulness in the face of unspeakable hardship. By drawing on his prodigious research and sticking to fact and statistic, he conveys the appalling treatment his heroes underwent and their horticultural defiance in a voice whose matter-of-factness is both piercing and compassionate.

The sixth chapter, “Postwar: Gardens after the War,” addresses the return of wartime landscapes to nature. Helphand notes, “The defiant war gardens we have examined were short-lived, but their duration is not at all proportional to their meaning.”

In the last chapter, “Digging Deeper,” Helphand expands on the themes of life, home, work, hope, and beauty discussed at the beginning. He also touches on gardens grown in more recent conflicts: Korea, the Balkans, Desert Storm, 9/11, and Iraq.

Historical black-and-white photographs of people at work in their defiant gardens and, particularly affecting, their artwork and war-sited garden-plan drawings, punctuate the text. A thoughtful feature of the book’s back matter is a directory that lets the reader know what became of the individuals so empathetically portrayed in the book.

Research

Though Helphand has drawn on an extensive bibliography, it does not include any source as comprehensive as his own book. In fact, his research is the first to document in one place the defiant gardens of the two world wars—their ghettos, their prisoner-of-war camps, and their internment venues.

Helphand believes that the best research method is just to “tell people what you are doing.” Thus, one conversation on the book might lead to another, which might lead to an unexpected new source.

For example, a friend who was conducting research on Anne Frank had come across an account of the Warsaw Ghetto that described its gardens. Likewise, his early

Opposite: Growing celery in a trench garden during World War I. Photographed Aug. 15, 1918. Directorate of Agricultural Production. Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, IWM Q9782.



travels took him to the Imperial War Museum, in London, where, in the reading room under its dome, he discovered a trove of garden-related accounts and photographs. But it was here that the archivist brought his attention to the World War I detention site at Ruhleben, a former race-track whose transformation by the British led him to write the chapter on prisoner-of-war internment camps.

Helphand has no personal association with the gardens of World War II; he had no family in the Holocaust, though he knows Holocaust survivors and many Japanese Americans who were interned in U.S. camps. Nonetheless, what he learned about the ghettos affected him profoundly, not only because he is Jewish but also because, he says, the ghetto historians were heroes—they recognized the urgency of recording life at the camps, knowing they would not survive. He was also surprised by the pervasiveness of the ghetto gardens and that their creation was enabled by such prewar institutions as Toporol, the Society to Encourage Agriculture among Jews. And, though initially daunted by the seeming lack of primary material on them,

he persevered, unearthing a wealth of first-person accounts and engaging a small army of people with connections to the war to translate them.

No one had written specifically about the ghetto gardens until Helphand's book brought to life the singular stories quietly housed at such repositories as the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, in New York, and the Lodz Ghetto archives. He also consulted the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and archives in Warsaw and Israel. In the end, Helphand feels he pretty much depleted this archival material. On the other hand, he says he barely scratched the surface with respect to documentation on gardening in prisoner-of-war camps. There were hundreds of these camps for each nation in World War II alone.

Helphand believed it was essential that he visit the sites he discussed. Though nothing remained at many of them, his foreknowledge allowed him to intuit many of their intangible qualities. The most powerful of these visits were his days walking the Warsaw Ghetto. He had maps from the 1940s, and by overlaying them on contemporary charts,

Sample Juror Comments—*Defiant Gardens*

Ann Forsyth: It is an incredibly moving book. It is really about the human spirit in extraordinary circumstances and how people relate to place and manipulate their places in the most challenging conditions. Gardening really is a core human activity. I must admit, I am an avid gardener. I just felt like every part of me was drawn into this book.

Anne Whiston Spirn: The garden is also a place of life

and rebirth. The most powerful thing is the author's conclusion from all of this research that in extreme times of death in war, in the Holocaust, etc., there is also this drive to plant gardens, tend gardens, which is about life and renewal and hope. So it is like the human condition: you can't have despair without hope. Some individuals find unbelievable ways to have life go on, even if they know that they may not be there.

Buzz Yudell: It also selected for so many issues and dimensions—culturally, geographically, issues of power, issues of just dealing with survival—all kinds of activities. It really is opening up new perceptions.

Anne Whiston Spirn: It is existential. It says in the most extreme situations people have to make gardens.

Roberta Feldman: A testimony to life—the notion that somehow, no matter how bad it gets, you are

he was able to pinpoint exact garden addresses and visualize precisely the actions of the people who had made them.

Understandably, he found these investigations “wearing.” He conducted them in chronological, historical order, the way they appear in the book. Emotionally exhausted, however, he needed to take a four-week break part-way through. Altogether, the book took eighteen months to research and write and another year to edit and print. Six people read the manuscript from cover to cover and offered comments; historians reviewed chapters relevant to their fields.

Aftermath

In a general discussion of winning entries this year one juror noted a tragic theme that seems to run through all of them. This is certainly true of *Defiant Gardens*. Yet like the others, it also involves themes of collaboration, everyday people, the importance of place and its meaning in people’s lives, and inventiveness in lean times.

Reviewers elsewhere have noted the book’s strong emotional undercurrent. According to one posting at Amazon.com: “Keep a hankie close by. You will be a better person for having read this book. It repeatedly illustrated resilience in people of all ages and races. People, like plants, want to live. Even if it is a daily struggle to survive, it is worth it to have another day. Read this book. You will be grateful.”

Since its publication *Defiant Gardens* has received awards from distinguished organizations in history, botany, and garden writing, and it has been acknowledged by the publishing and environmental-design fields.

Everywhere Helphand speaks these days, people come up to him to recount their own stories. An American soldier who spent time as a prisoner of war in Poland during World War II, told him he had restored derelict greenhouses there with the Germans’ permission and then grew food in them from seeds provided by the Red Cross and

the YMCA. He is the only American soldier to have won the Bronze Star for Gardening. Another audience member gave Helphand a list of Japanese World War II prisoner-of-war camps, telling him there was a garden in every one.

Images and stories continue to pour in. Helphand received a note from a woman whose daughter, in prison, reads the book to other inmates and contributes to the prison garden. A helicopter pilot who served in Vietnam sent him a picture of a garden he grew there, citing its meanings to him and noting that the book validated those feelings.

Helphand is not planning a “sequel” to *Defiant Gardens*, but he has launched a website (www.defiantgardens.com) to record these pictures and narratives. The book’s ghetto chapter may become an exhibition that will include photographs that do not appear in the book. A University of Oregon colleague has suggested that the ghetto section serve as the basis for a play.

Finally, though Helphand does not teach a full course on defiant gardens, he speaks about them in his landscape architecture courses, especially with respect to what he learned about research methods while working on the book; he now has a much deeper understanding of places and people and the interaction of the two. He also came to believe even more strongly that gardens (and gardening) are not only vital to everyday life but also, like the other arts, fundamental to human existence.

—Susan H. Packard

Opposite left: Clearing rubble for a garden in the Lodz ghetto.

Opposite right: Scarecrow in the vegetable garden of the Lodz ghetto hospital. Images from the Ghetto Fighters Museum/Israel.

Reprinted with permission of the Archive of Modern Conflict/London.

celebrating life through that act of gardening.

Anne Whiston Spirn: And the worse it gets, the more the impulse is there.

Roberta Feldman: I find it also an impressive work of research. When I read the proposal I wasn’t excited. Then, when I picked up the book, I went “Oh, my gosh, the sources!” How does one find information in these circumstances? It is a labor

of love because it is a hunt for archival research in sources that are disparate and all over the world. It is truly remarkable.

Buzz Yudell: I think it is also very compelling.

It presents a diverse set of examples, yet in a very straightforward way. And very memorable.

Ann Forsyth: The illustrations were very well collected, and they obviously took a lot of work to uncover.

Roberta Feldman: The story to me is also about human dignity. Gardening not only speaks to sustaining a sense of living, but also creating something out of earth, sustaining a sense of self-dignity under these hideous circumstances.