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After Sandy

BY NANCY SOLOMON

“We started moving items upstairs little by little, kind of sitting back, wondering if we should take this seriously. We kept thinking it’s late October and we’re not supposed to be worrying about hurricanes now. The Atlantic is cool—that should be a plus on our side. But everything shouldn’t be what it turned out to be.”

— John and Michael Toomey, boatyard owners, Amityville.

Fishermen and boaters have a long history of contending with Mother Nature. Alongside them are boat builders and boatyard owners, who are entrusted with protecting their customers’ vessels, recreational and commercial alike. After Superstorm Sandy there may be some important lessons to be learned from these tradition bearers.

“Probably 98 percent of the boats that stayed in the water didn’t sustain any damage. They were all fine. There was not near as much damage as the boats on land—basically the boats on land sunk on land,” recall the Toomey brothers. Danny Schmidt, owner of Davison’s Boat Yard in East Rockaway, had a similar experience: “My first thoughts were—how do you prepare for it, hope it doesn’t hit you and if it does, you don’t want to think of it. Reality—when it happens—you go along putting everything back together. It’s not a matter of we’ll never survive it or we can’t fix it. We went from being six feet under water to within days having equipment and trucks running. There is stuff you do to prepare—turn electrical off, tie up certain items—boats here and there. We prepared for a lot of storms in the past but nothing like Sandy. It was crazy with the tide. The building saved our boats—because everything stayed inside the buildings. A lot of the other yards—[they] don’t have buildings and their boats are outside. Once boats are lifted off their chocks, they go the way of the wind. Only had a few boats damaged from that part of it—very little physical damage—but a lot mechanically because they sank on land. It wasn’t until January that we got boats off the ground.”

As Betty Arink of the Bayles Boat Shop in Port Jefferson reflected, “Boats belong in



Davison’s Boat Yard of East Rockaway shortly after Superstorm Sandy. Photo courtesy of Danny Schmidt.

the water.”

Further down the coast in Far Rockaway, the historic bungalows along Beach 24–26th streets, recently listed on the National Register of Historic Places, also have important lessons for us. Shortly after Sandy hit, I feared that the bungalows would be devastated and destroyed, given all the bad news we heard about the Far Rockaway peninsula. I was pleasantly surprised and somewhat shocked that there was minimal damage, but then quickly remembered why

they survived many other storms over their 90-year history. The modest frame homes were set back from the beach behind a protective dune. After the 1938 hurricane, also known as the “Long Island Express,” the Army Corps of Engineers began building a series of jetties, including one at Rockaway Inlet just to the east of the bungalows. According to bungalow owners, this jetty helps protect the homes adjacent to the inlet. The bungalow owners and local residents also began a dune stabilization



Along Beach 25th Street in Far Rockaway, these and other bungalows were fortunate to survive Superstorm Sandy. Photo by Nancy Solomon, November 6, 2013.

project in the past decade that helped protect the bungalows. The bungalows, like bay houses, are set on locust posts that allow water to travel underneath the wood frame structures. The modest height of the bungalows also protects them from strong winds and gusts.

When we think of storms and the built environment, we often expect that public works projects will have the best minds examining the problem and developing solutions. Fortunately, many government workers now recognize the value of the knowledge of local tradition bearers, sometimes referred to as “Local Ecological Knowledge” or LEK. During the past six months, officials from FEMA and other agencies have actively pursued bungalow and bay houses owners, boat builders, and other maritime tradition bearers in the hopes that their knowledge will help others in coastal communities. As Ellen McHale wrote in her column in the previous issue of *Voices* (38:3-4), community residents have an intimate understanding of their region’s waterfronts, whether it’s located in the Schoharie and Mohawk valleys or on Long Island’s barrier beaches or bays. As advocates for traditions, we cannot forget the practical knowledge that generations of coastal residents have acquired and that can benefit others.

So the next time you hear of an approaching storm, ask the person in town whose livelihood depends on the weather how to prepare and what to expect. They have many lessons and words of advice to share. As fisherman Tony Sougstad recalled in a recent interview: “The best tool we had was local knowledge passed down from fisherman to fisherman, and the barometer. If the glass rises, the weather is going to be fair; if it rises too fast, we’re going to have westerly [winds]; and if the glass falls, we’re going to get nor’easters.” If you have a tradition relating to weather events, let us know. Your knowledge can help others. ▼

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The Heart Has Reasons: Dutch Rescuers of Jewish Children during the Holocaust by Mark Klempner. New York: Night Stand Press, 2012. 225 pages, foreword, map, 46 black-and-white photographs, update, acknowledgments, notes. \$18, trade paperback.

The Holocaust left an indelible imprint on Mark Klempner’s family, and has always maintained a presence in his own life. His maternal grandfather left Hungary in 1936, only to later have his parents and 10 brothers murdered by the Nazis. His father escaped Poland at the age of 11 on the last boat to leave the country in 1939. And as a boy, Klempner himself can recall looking through timeworn photo albums with his father’s mother. He describes one such incident in the introduction to *The Heart Has Reasons*: “[She] once sat me on her lap and, turning the pages of photo albums from the old country, showed me wedding pictures, sepia-toned young couples, smiling women, and plump children in their little white shoes. ‘Hitler took them all,’ she said” (v).

Even so, the Holocaust was never spoken of in Klempner’s home. This silence lent it a distinct presence (like the proverbial elephant in the room), but also kept it frustratingly just beyond his reach. It was only natural, then, that Klempner would try to find some way to personally connect with the Holocaust. His opportunity came when he received a grant in college from the Cornell Institute for European Studies. For his project he chose to interview Dutch men and women who risked their lives to save Jewish children during the Holocaust. This research grew into *The Heart Has Reasons*, and the book itself is a treasure. It captures and preserves rich stories of heroism that would otherwise be lost to the march of time, and at the same time provides readers with a powerful source of inspiration by demonstrating that goodness can thrive even amidst the most evil circumstances.

The Heart Has Reasons profiles 10 rescuers with whom Klempner met, and the book’s greatest strength is that—in true folk spirit—it allows each rescuer to tell his or her own story. Klempner doesn’t filter or paraphrase anyone, and there’s no reason he should want to. After

all, these are feisty, colorful individuals who defied Nazi brutality to save the lives of Jewish children. They possess unique voices, full of humor and anger and life; being able to hear each one is a privilege, and this makes the book an engrossing and enjoyable read. Take, for example, the priceless way rescuer Clara Dijkstra describes a confrontation she had with Nazi thugs who objected to her wearing a pin adorned with an image of the Queen: “He took me by the arm, and dragged me into a building full of Nazis. They all screamed at me, and I screamed back at them. After about twenty minutes, they kicked me in the butt and threw me out the door. I was back on the street, but they’d ripped off my pin, and I had a sore butt” (83). This isn’t the dry history of so many textbooks, but is rather history as a series of stories told by the people who were actually there. As such, it positively sparkles with life and humanity.

Other anecdotes in Klempner’s book are obviously far less amusing than Ms. Dijkstra’s. There are stories of parents and children being separated, often never to see one other again; of brave people being betrayed to death; and of the zeal with which the Nazis went about their atrocities. Ultimately, though, these dark deeds are overshadowed by the selflessness and bravery of the 10 rescuers profiled by Klempner—men and women who risked their lives to defy the seemingly invincible German war machine and rescue Jewish children. This is *their* book, and it serves as a shining testament to the fact that there was more to the Holocaust than the savagery of Hitler and the cheering masses who supported him. There were also goodness and valor and grace from ordinary people like Hetty Voute, who describes the simple philosophy that she and many other rescuers shared: “Sometimes people would tell me, ‘The Germans are unstoppable. Whatever you do won’t matter.’ I answered, ‘It will matter to the children we save’” (22). We should be thankful that people like her existed during the darkest days of the Holocaust, and thankful as well that Mark Klempner has preserved their stories for us and for future generations.

—Kevin Rogan
Reference Librarian, Crandall Public Library

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