

# A Forger and a Cartoonist Worth Celebrating

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**KAMINSKY, Sarah.** *Adolfo Kaminsky: A Forger's Life*. Los Angeles: DoppelHouse Press, 2016. 8vo. Paperback. xvii, 232. Illustrations. \$18.95.

**BRAY, Glenn, and YOUNG, Frank M.** *To Laugh That We May Not Weep: The Life & Times of Art Young*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2017. 4to. Hardbound. 381pp. Extensive illustrations. \$49.99.

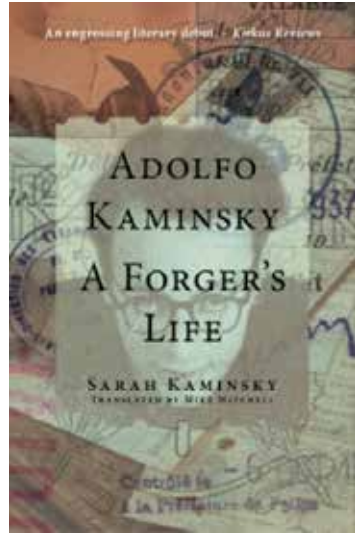
If you never thought you'd cheer for a forger, not in a million years, you've never read Sarah Kaminsky's portrait of her father, *Adolfo Kaminsky: A Forger's Life*. Not since Donald Pleasence played RAF Flight Lieutenant Colin Blythe in the 1963 classic *The Great Escape*, in which he forges German papers for escaping POWs, have I rooted for a practitioner of that dark art whose output us sleuths in the world of historical autographs have a passion for detecting and exposing.

*Adolfo Kaminsky: A Forger's Life* was actually first published in 2009 in France and would never have come to this reviewer's attention were it not for Anderson Cooper profiling him on *60 Minutes* recently. No doubt the release of the first translation of this book into English occasioned this coverage.

Sarah Kaminsky knew only hazy generalities of her father's involvement in the French resistance during World War II, so a

series of interviews with him and surviving colleagues form the basis of what's basically a first-person, present-tense memoir by now 92-year-old Adolfo, interspersed with brief questions from the daughter.

Born in France to Russian Jewish refugees but immediately removed to Argentina, young Adolfo ended up back in France as a child with his parents and siblings. As France falls and the war unfolds, the Kaminskys in rural France don't feel the



oppression as quickly and severely as their Parisian brethren, but gradually the uncle in whose house they live flees, the house is commandeered and converted into a brothel for German officers, his mother dies mysteriously on a train trip, and finally the family is shipped off to a refugee camp for several months. Eventually their status as Argentinians earns their release. Adolfo's training as an apprentice dyer brings him to the attention of the Resistance, where his knowledge of chemistry enables him to eradicate inks of all kinds and his high school knowledge of printing techniques and knack for imitating scripts and solving technical challenges make him the Perfect Storm of forgers.

Young, smart and motivated, Adolfo soon becomes the go-to man among French Resistance forgers, able to work in a cramped, cobbled—together laboratory and cranking out an astonishing quantity and variety of documents: visas, passports, driver's licenses, birth and baptismal certificates, ration cards, identity cards – anything that will help Jews to exit or move about the country. It's a grim, grueling existence in unhealthy conditions, a world of distrust and intrigue and paranoia, of clandestine meetings to hand off finished products and pick up new orders, an endless battle to

save lives by producing as many forged papers as he can as quickly as possible. “Stay awake,” he intones.

*For as long as possible. Fight against sleep. It's a simple calculation: in one hour I can make thirty blank documents; if I sleep for an hour, thirty people will die....*

Adolfo works for underground organizations whose acronyms, names and nearly-identical goals I soon don't even attempt to keep straight. I realize that, like most Americans, too many war movies and *Hogan's Heroes* episodes had trained me into thinking of the French Resistance as a single rag-tag group of devil-may-care, beret and trenchcoat clad patriots – not the bewildering range of disparate groups with differing purposes who had no umbrella organization and seldom worked in unison.

You would think the war's end would bring *Adolfo Kaminsky: A Forger's Life* to a poignant close – but not so Kaminsky, as this comprises only the first half of his narrative. Europe is now overrun with hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, many of whom hope to help found a new Jewish state in Palestine but cannot leave for lack of papers and other bureaucratic obstructions. One French group wants Adolfo to forge for them “to allow the survivors of the camps to immigrate into Palestine illegally. . . . I refused to start taking part in illegal activities again now the war was over.” A visit to some refugee camps in Germany, with hordes of surviving concentration camp children, homeless and violent, roaming the countryside and robbing at will, dissolves his resolve.

World War II left Kaminsky scarred and aimless. “My childhood shortened by the war,” he recalls, “the years underground, the people I hadn't been able to save. . . . had marked me indelibly. I couldn't accept that all that was over for me. . . .” He married, fathered two children and divorced. He took on odd photography and dying jobs. He enjoyed a couple years of near-happiness photographing the coastlines of Europe for a postcard company with an African-

American woman: “True, we weren’t rich at all but we were artists, free and happy! This Bohemian life suited both of us...” He even had an offer to continue the same job in America, and promised to join his girlfriend there in a few months.

But resistance to oppression and authoritarianism was too deeply entrenched in Kaminsky’s soul. The France for which he had forged during the war soon became the bad guy in the 1950s as they struggled to maintain control over their colony Algeria. This North African country became to France the albatross that Vietnam was to the United States, and the happenings there – massacres, executions – shook Adolfo to his core. From the large photography and photoengraving studio he set up in Paris Kaminsky now resumed his forging in peace-time France aiding Algerian freedom fighters, eventually fleeing to Belgium when the heat was on and discovery imminent. By the time Algeria achieved independence in 1962 he had forged mass quantities of French bank notes – never circulated -- intending to destabilize the French economy.

Forging for freedom fighters became a way of life Kaminsky couldn’t escape. He ended up working for a great many of them. “After the Dominicans and the Haitians, it was the Brazilians’ turn... the anti-apartheid movements in South Africa... Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Angola, Portuguese colonies... Thus it was that in that year, 1967, I was supplying forged papers to combatants and draft-dodgers in fifteen different countries, and that was nothing compared with subsequent years, up to 1971.” A decade on non-forging in Algiers followed, teaching photography and printing, before retiring to France in 1982.

Frankly, the first half of *Adolfo Kaminsky: A Forger’s Life* satisfies far more than the second. It’s difficult to compare battling the blatant brutality and genocide of occupying Nazi forces to distant colonial oppression, far-removed political turmoil and foreign unrest. To fight Nazi invaders in your own backyard is a brave and worthy thing, to be sure. But am I alone in thinking that making your life’s work forging in order to redress wrongs around

the world may be noble but is also vaguely troubling? For me the book enters a moral grey area at this point.

I can't help but think, too, that memories of events more than half a century previous naturally get exaggerated over time. The repeated use of "hundreds" and "thousands" raises a red flag for me. For instance, when Adolfo describes his difficulty in writing a "Dear Jane" letter to his American girlfriend, he notes, "I'd drafted hundreds of letters to explain my silence. . . ." *Hundreds?* Really? Or when he says, "Francis and Daniel had been astounded when they went through the laboratory and asked thousands of questions." *Thousands?* Really? Are we to take that literally? I don't question Kaminsky's remarkable career or begrudge an old man vivid memories of his youth, but when it comes to details I came to take him with-- well, a grain or three of salt. Here's where an editor or ghost writer, rather than an adoring daughter as compiler, might have stepped in and sought more believable accuracy in the details.

*Adolfo Kaminsky: A Forger's Life* fascinates as a case study of a man driven by a lifelong compulsion, a psychological need, to combat oppression. Adolfo certainly had principles: He scrupulously avoided making money other than subsistence to avoid the appearance of a mercenary – it's extraordinary that he was able to put food on the table given his all-absorbing forgery work – and he always refused to carry firearms -- though he once produced an intentionally impotent detonator intended to assassinate a political figure and another time let a colleague store weapons and ammunition in his apartment.

"Autograph people," to crudely lump us together, will delight in Adolfo Kaminsky's descriptions of his innovative forging techniques (none detailed enough to likely aid today's forgers) and thrill over his depiction of the cloak-and-dagger life of a French Resistance fighter. *Adolfo Kaminsky: A Forger's Life* is a moving portrait of a compelling figure in a field rarely occupied by noble persons struggling to combat evil and right wrongs.