

# Out of obscurity

## Barbara Mellor reveals to Aletta Stevens how a chance discovery on eBay led to the most intense yet rewarding experience of her freelance translation career



Aletta Stevens is a freelance Dutch translator, and founder member of ITI. Her translation of the biography of the Dutch film director Paul Verhoeven was published by Faber and Faber. Her interest in the Resistance was rekindled after recent research into her uncle's death in 1944 and her family's involvement with the Resistance in Nazi-occupied Holland.

Barbara Mellor has been a full-time freelance translator for over 20 years, specialising in art history, the fine and decorative arts, and fashion and design. Her translation of Agnès Humbert's French Second World War diary *Résistance: Memoirs of Occupied France* was published in 2008 and shortlisted for the Scott Moncrieff prize. In March she took centre stage at this year's Bath Literature Festival where she was interviewed, together with Resistance historian Matthew Cobb, by the French/English novelist Michèle Roberts, and signed copies of *Résistance*. Here she talks to Aletta Stevens about her experience of translating a story that, paradoxically, is both harrowing and humorous.

### How did you get into translation?

My first job after university – I studied English and French at Sussex – was as an editorial assistant and then an editor at Weidenfeld & Nicolson. I worked on a lot of books on French subjects, which sometimes involved translation or retranslation. As with editing, I found I loved it. I didn't really have a career plan; looking back, I think I was enormously lucky. After ten years as an in-house editor I went freelance and moved to France, and the translation work took over.

### How did you discover the original 1946 edition of *Résistance*?

I found it on French eBay when I was looking for information about the Resistance memorial at the end of our road in France, and was

instantly intrigued: I hadn't heard of either the book or the author.

### Is it unusual for a translator to instigate a book project?

I'd never instigated a project before, but I believed so passionately in the book that I simply had to get it published. From the start there was the most extraordinary feeling about it, as though the project was being swept along on a tide of belief and goodwill.

### Why was the book not translated into English before?

Post-war France didn't really want to be reminded of all the humiliations and compromises of the war, and after the book was first published it slipped into obscurity. It was Agnès Humbert's grandson Antoine Sabbagh who was the driving force behind the 2004 French edition.

### How could Agnès have written such a detailed account? Where could she possibly have hidden her notebooks?

It's an enigma. In some ways the whole project has been like a detective story that's still unfolding. Her grandson Antoine was always told by his father Jean – who was

**'From the start there was the most extraordinary feeling about the project, as though it was being swept along on a tide of belief and goodwill'**

arrested as a collaborator and briefly disowned by Agnès after the Liberation – that the original notebooks had not survived. Yet only recently, after Jean's death, Antoine found one of them among his father's things.

### Your translation has been published in many countries. Into how many languages was it translated, and was this from your English translation or from the original French edition?

Editions have been sold in Italy, Spain (Castilian and Catalan), Holland, Denmark, Romania, Switzerland, Brazil, Israel, Portugal, Turkey and the USA. Only the last uses my translation, as the others have obviously worked from the French. Most but not all have used my notes.

### Agnès Humbert spoke English, German and a little Russian, which enabled her to communicate with her fellow prisoners, her captors and her liberators. Did she have a talent for languages?

Agnès was clearly a born communicator and a committed internationalist, who seemed to take speaking several languages for granted. She spent her childhood in Lorraine and her mother was English, so she would have heard both English and German spoken around her as she was growing up.

### You became more involved with this translation than with any other. What mental and physical effects did it have on you?

Staying as faithful as I could to Agnès's voice, attempting to capture every nuance of it, meant that inevitably I became caught up in the horror of her experience. Yet at the same time the sheer force of her character, her refusal to surrender even a shred of her humanity and humour, was exhilarating. Working on the notes was gruelling because it involved reading many other testimonies of the Holocaust, but there was also a sense of urgency about it, as it enabled me to establish independent corroboration for so much of her story. The whole project



## A POWERFUL WARTIME MEMOIR

### ***Résistance: Memoirs of Occupied France* by Agnès Humbert, translated by Barbara Mellor**

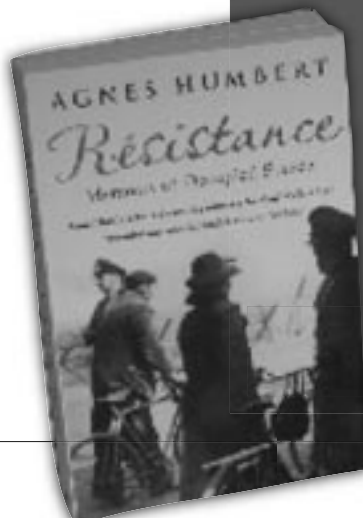
When Agnès Humbert's French war diary *Notre Guerre* was published in 1946, it caused a considerable stir. One of the first personal accounts of the war, it begins with the story of Agnès Humbert's involvement in one of France's first Resistance cells, which grew up around the left-wing intellectuals employed at the prestigious Musée de l'Homme and its sister institution, the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, in Paris. On 15 December 1940, the group clandestinely published one of the first Resistance newspapers, whose title *Résistance* has also been used for the 2008 English translation of *Notre Guerre* by Barbara Mellor. The members of the *Musée de l'Homme* group, led by the linguist/ethnologist Boris Vildé, also provided intelligence to the Allies, including details about German military activities. In addition, they helped escaped prisoners and Allied airmen across the demarcation line that divided France into the Nazi-occupied North and the unoccupied South, under the Vichy government led by collaborator Marshal Pétain until November 1942. Agnès, a well-known 45-year-old art historian and divorced mother of two grown-up sons, describes how she helped to found one of the first Resistance networks in Occupied France. After just five months, the group was infiltrated by the Gestapo, and 19 members were arrested, which led to the first major Resistance trial. Seven of the men were executed by firing squad on charges of espionage, whilst Agnès Humbert was sentenced to five years' hard labour in Germany.

Despite the book's subtitle, 'Memoirs of Occupied France', the main part of the book consists of Agnès's detailed account of her years in prison, first in France, and then in Germany as a slave labourer, culminating in her time at the notorious Phrix Rayon Factory in Krefeld. Conditions in the factory and living quarters were atrocious, and the treatment of female prisoners inhumane. Through all the suffering, however, Agnès maintains her indomitable spirit, her sense of humour, her compassion, and her belief that the war will one day end. Her camaraderie and solidarity with her fellow prisoners are an immense source of strength to her, and she also supports others in times of extreme distress. It is this spirit of resistance that pervades the book, and finds practical expression in small acts of sabotage in the factories in which she is forced to work. Her sense of irony provides a welcome relief during the four years of hardship, and enables the reader to continue turning the pages until liberation finally comes.

Remarkably, as soon as the Americans have arrived, Agnès makes no further mention of her wounds and deteriorating health, and throws herself into organising health care for others in the post-war chaos that ensues. The final chapter is called 'Hunting the Nazis', and concludes with her return to Paris. In 1949 Agnès Humbert was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* for her Resistance work; she continued to write books on art history until her death in 1963.

The English edition is enhanced by William Boyd's preface and evocative photographs of the personalities and locations featured in the story. In addition, the book has a bibliography, an index, and appendix with documents on the Resistance, including other accounts of the period that put Agnès's experiences into context. The beautifully written afterword is a translated and edited version of the introduction by Julien Blanc for the 2004 reprint of *Notre Guerre* published by Editions Tallandier, instigated by Agnès's grandson Antoine Sabbagh. Finally, the translator's notes contain so many heroic and moving stories of major figures in the Resistance that they are as interesting a read as the book itself.

*Résistance: Memoirs of Occupied France* is published in paperback by Bloomsbury Publishing ([www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)) at £8.99.



was an extremely intense experience, at once dark and inspiring.

**The author was not only half-English but also an art historian. Did you feel that, because you are English and have translated books on art history, you were somehow meant to give her a voice, over 60 years later?**

Stumbling upon a powerful first-hand account of a period close to my heart was a rare opportunity in itself: to feel the narrator as such a warm and compelling presence made it all the more extraordinary. The fact that Agnès was a middle-aged female art historian with a family certainly helped me to relate to her, and also to gain a degree of insight into the depth of her courage and conviction. I did feel a strong bond with her, almost as though I could hear her voice. It was a tremendous privilege to feel so close to this remarkable woman. I was aware throughout that I'd never experienced anything like this before, and perhaps never would again.

**Barbara says of the translation: 'It was almost as though I could hear her voice.'**

#### Links

<http://journalisted.com/barbara-mellor>  
[www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/jul/11/antoine-sabbagh-family-nazis-resistance](http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/jul/11/antoine-sabbagh-family-nazis-resistance)