

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

"A Full Life" Joseph A. Cohen

"A Full Life" by Joseph A. Cohen
Bound by Khoni Bindery
Lowell, MA

Review by Rene Schwiesow

The beauty of a Saturday morning spent with the Bagel Bards at the Davis Square Au Bon Pain in Somerville is the interaction with wonderful, creative, artistic individuals. The numbers of attending Bagel Bards has grown so that there are now two groupings of tables and the best way to work the situation is to spend some time at one grouping and then move over to the other grouping so as not to miss people and/or discussions. I don't always make that move. I was fortunate recently to have done so. I spied an empty chair next to a poet that I had known for some time. She was talking with a man from Long Island who was in the area visiting his daughter and I wriggled my way into the conversation. The sparkle of his eyes and his warm demeanor made an immediate impact as he told me how welcoming the people in the Boston area had been. I secretly held the thought that it was his sparkle and warmth that drew others close. Recently this 93-³/₄ year old man lost his wife and he spoke of the loss and her death with a mixture of love and awe for the quiet grace in her passing.

Cohen spent the majority of his life creating a successful table linen business. However, a love for the artistic is in his blood. His wife, Sonia, was a visual artist, a musician and a composer. His daughter, Beth, is a world-renowned violinist. After his retirement, Cohen began taking courses in poetry and found the music in the rhythm of words. He also teaches photography (yes, he is still teaching) at the college level and most of the photos in "A Full Life," are his own work. The cover photo is a beautiful, touching image of children, Algerian orphans. When the photo was taken, Cohen who was in Orange near Avignon, spoke to the children in Arabic, designating one of the girls as "director," asking her to lead the children in their roles for the camera. Based on the composition of the photo, I would say they were both successful!

"A Full Life" is an unfolding of the pages of Cohen's life laid open for his readers to witness. By the time we've finished reading, those pages have quietly folded themselves back into a metaphorical origami crane, which takes flight with an underlying peace. It is a peace that threads its way through even the harshest of Cohen's times. Cohen spent three years overseas during World War II; and in spite of the war he continued to find beauty in humanity and the world around him. In "Buzz Bomb Christmas," we join in the party created in the midst of "snow, sleet, sirens and the stench of exploding gunpowder." Another round of buzz bombs above does not dampen the spirit as singing women and children rush for basement shelters. And as night brings weariness to the children, he ends the dance with "like chaperones at a prom, Madame Nys and I sound taps."

The book is dedicated to his wife, Sonia, and her presence is a constant through every facet of the work.