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YOUNG BOY

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### BOOK REVIEW

#### **THOMAS BUERGENTHAL, *A LUCKY CHILD – A MEMOIR OF SURVIVING AUSCHWITZ AS A YOUNG BOY***

PROFILE BOOKS, LONDON, 2009.

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On a visit to Australia last year, Judge Thomas Buergenthal of the World Court gave an interview to this *Journal* (October 2009, 14-15). His autobiography *A Lucky Child* has now been published in English. It tells of his terrible years in wartime German concentration camps. He attributes his good fortune in surviving the Holocaust to luck, aided by his fluent unaccented Polish and German, and the fact that he did not look Jewish.

Judge Buergenthal waited nearly six decades before writing this book, perhaps because of the intense pain occasioned by returning to the memories of such a childhood. Clearly, the events he describes influenced the commitment of his life to building protections for the rule of law and for human rights on a global level.

The book is mainly a chronological description of the life of the young Thomas, born in Czechoslovakia in 1933 to loving parents to whose memory the work is dedicated. The signature theme is suggested by the book's title. The author explains how, having first escaped from Czechoslovakia to Poland, his mother consulted a famous fortune teller in Katowice. She had removed her wedding ring in order to give no

clues. Yet without knowing her family situation, the seer predicted that her son was *ein Glückskind* – a lucky child. He would emerge unscathed from the future that awaited his family and friends. So it was to prove. But survival only happened by a series of miracles.

A great danger arose immediately upon Thomas's arrival at Auschwitz. One of the rare administrative mistakes of his German supervisors led them to believe that Thomas had already been classified as fit to live. Normally a young boy would have perished. So Thomas went into the camp. Somehow, he also avoided contracting diphtheria and the many other diseases that were raging. All around him friends were dying.

For those who have lived their lives in suburban Australia, this is a hair-raising book. It tells a tale that was repeated millions of times, but rarely with the consistent protection of such good fortune. It is as if fate had a mighty purpose in mind for the young Thomas Buergenthal.

Following the defeat of the Nazi regime in Europe, Thomas returned to the family home in Göttingen, a university city in Germany. His father had not survived but his mother did. He was not happy in post-war Germany. So in 1951, he decided to leave and to seek a new life with relatives in the United States. In a land of opportunity, fresh miracles opened up that were finally to take the then Professor Tom Buergenthal to his judicial chambers in the Peace Palace in The Hague.

Judge Buergenthal has written a gripping and instructive book. It is written factually and without undue emotion. In the end, it is the banality of evil and the easy seduction of good people into complicity with evil that forms the lasting impression of this book. Against the dark forces in

human nature, every society must build strong legal and social defences for human rights. Judge Buerghenthal's life story has lessons for us in Australia as we consider the Brennan report and how we should repair the weak legal protections for human rights in our country. If a civilised nation like Germany could fall victim to such barbarity, Australia is not immune from similar dangers.

MICHAEL KIRBY