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Gardens and War

Why is it that in the midst of a war one can still find gardens? Wartime gardens are dramatic examples of what I call "defiant gardens" – gardens created in extreme social, political, economic, or cultural conditions – and I decided that I wanted to explore this question further. There had been nothing written on gardens and war, however, so when I first visited the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, I was greeted with a certain amount of skepticism. Soon, however, I became known as "the garden guy," and eager archivists were providing perceptive hints about places to visit and sources to consult for information about my subject.

The book that resulted, *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006), examines gardens of war in the twentieth century – the century of the deadliest wars in human history. I looked at gardens soldiers built inside and behind the trenches in World War I; gardens built in the Warsaw and other ghettos under the Nazis during World War II; gardens in the POW and civilian internment camps of both world wars; and gardens created by Japanese Americans held at U.S. internment camps during World War II. These wartime gardens accentuate the multiple meanings of gardens – life, home, work, hope, and beauty – that are embodied in all garden creation. *Defiant Gardens* brought to light a history that had never been studied and many moving stories never before told.

The experience of researching and writing the book was extraordinary, but the reception of the book was far beyond my expectations. It was well reviewed and received awards from diverse quarters – the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Environmental Design Research Association, libraries, horticultural societies, and garden writers – testifying to the breadth of interest in gardens and their meaning. It also inspired several articles about defiant gardens, most often connecting my general thesis to local situations. *Philadelphia Inquirer* writer Virginia Smith accompanied her article with another about Philadelphia Green, the urban-gardening program of the Philadelphia Horticultural Society. In Detroit, the *Metro Times* reviewer discussed gardens in North Corktown and Heidelberg Street. A Memorial Day interview on NPR with Ketzel Levine led to twenty-five additional radio interviews around the country, broadcast by stations with an immense collective listenership. I've received invitations for over fifty speaking engagements – at universities, libraries, botanic gardens, arboreta, professional groups, and conferences – and at

nearly every one I've attended, an individual has presented me with material that reinforces my conclusions concerning defiant gardens and the centrality of the garden experience.

At the North Carolina Arboretum I met Dr. John Creech, a renowned horticulturalist and former director of the National Arboretum, who shared his story with me. During World War II Dr. Creech was captured by the Germans in North Africa and imprisoned at a POW camp in Poland. There was a derelict greenhouse on the camp's grounds, and a fellow soldier convinced the authorities that Dr. Creech should be allowed to refurbish it. He received seeds from the Red Cross and grew food that helped sustain the prisoners. Awarded the Bronze Star for this effort, Dr. Creech may be the only American soldier to be decorated for gardening. Right after the war, in 1946, he wrote an article about his experiences for *Better Homes and Gardens* entitled "I Gardened for my Life."

Bill Beardall now lives in North Carolina, but in 1970 he was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. He wrote me that during the war he planted a garden just outside his hooch (a Quonset hut), and he sent me a photograph of it. There he planted bananas, watermelons, and periwinkles. "It had a calming affect on me," Beardall explained, "after a long day of flying missions in the I Corps area, to see a little bit of green growing by my doorway." He added, "As small as it was, it was my oasis. Many a day or late evening I would sit on my 'patio,' drink a 'cocktail,' and enjoy the setting of the sun in the west. I could almost block out the medevac choppers going out and the sound of the artillery in the distance. I have never forgotten much from that war and never my oasis. . . . Thank you for reminding me that even one small little garden can create a sense of peace and hope in the midst of a war and a warrior's heart."

Tom Denis, a civilian pilot who flew soldiers home from Iraq, told me about the following ceremony: "The flight attendants on those trips would bring along a strip of sod from America and would lay it on the threshold of the aircraft entry door. As the servicemen boarded the aircraft for their long-awaited flight back home from war, they were told of this strip of grass upon which they were about to step. It was American soil! The men always smiled and some stepped over it, some planted two feet directly on the strip, and others bent down to kiss it. Reactions varied, but this small strip of living, growing, green grass from America had an overpowering effect on each of the men."

I have continued to receive many images of gardens in Iraq and Afghanistan, created by both solders and civilians. In December 2006 newspapers reported on the remarkable work of Jaafar Hamid al Ali, the parks supervisor of Baghdad, whose "principle is, for every drop of Iraqi blood, we must plant something green." Over thirty of his workers have been killed, but he considers them "fallen martyrs" in the struggle to beautify Baghdad. Since then, the situation in Iraq has improved; in November of 2009 the *New York Times* reported that nurseries were again doing business and that "gardens remain one of the few flourishes of public ornament on Baghdad's otherwise brown streets, defiant displays of foliage amid concrete blast walls and security checkpoints." In many areas, topiary has become fashionable. Displays of order and care, the gardens also reinforce the meanings of garden work. As one worker noted, "When you take care of the gardens, you forget the war."

One mother told me that she had sent a copy of the book to her daughter who was incarcerated at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Oregon. She reported that her daughter had found the book inspirational and that "other inmates are lined up to read it after she's shared passages out loud with them."

My visits to the garden sites I had researched for my book were especially powerful for me. I had the opportunity to speak about ghetto gardens at two conferences in Germany – one on "Jewish Topographies," the other on "Parks and Gardens and the Jewish Community 1933-1945." I also returned to Manzanar to speak about gardens created by Japanese-American internees and then walked the site with other conference attendees. In 2008 the grandchildren of internees who had built Manzanar's remarkable Merritt Park returned to participate in its archeological excavation.

When I traveled to Bogota and Medellin, Colombia, where hundreds of persons attended my talks at the library and botanic garden, the director made a special point of inviting the garden workers. I was moved and surprised by their profound response to the distant events I described. Then I realized that this audience understood the power of gardens in times of war because Colombia has been the scene of civil warfare for forty years. I also met with gardeners in Bogota's squatter settlements, refugees from the violence in the countryside. Luis Antonio Medina proudly showed us his rooftop garden, replete with plants from his native province of Boyaca; it serves both as a reminder of his former rural home and a place of solace and activity in the city. In Medellin I was asked why the kidnappers didn't even allow their victims a garden, a rhetorical question that seemed to underscore their cruelty. (This was shortly after the rescue of former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt from captivity.) I could only respond that the United States had not allowed gardens in Guantanamo, although some prisoners there managed to create gardens from seeds gathered at mealtime and produce melons, peppers, and even a miniature lemon tree. (Paradoxically, the United States had allowed Saddam Hussein a garden plot.)

Particularly satisfying has been the opportunity to meet remarkable individuals and tell stories that might otherwise have been lost. In my book I had noted that the lives of ghetto gardens, like those of the ghettos themselves and their prisoners, were short, but that they had still supplied important respites for those around them who were suffering; the brevity of their existence did not lessen their significance. Roman Kent, a survivor of the Lodz Ghetto whose experiences I had recounted,

Clearing rubble for a garden, Lodz Ghetto. Photograph courtesy of Ghetto Fighter's Museum, Israel.

Archaeological excavation of Merritt Park, Manzanar, California, built by Japanese-Americans interned during WWII. Photograph by Kenneth Helphand.

attended my talk in Connecticut. I asked him to address the audience and he moved me by saying that yes, the gardens were short-lived, but that my book had given them a kind of immortality.

The fact that the book is inspiring new projects is equally exciting. At Fort Drum, in Jefferson County, New York, a defiant-gardens project has been established in collaboration with several 4-H clubs, the Cornell Cooperative Extension, and The Growing Connection (TGC), a grassroots project developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The project was instigated by Dr. Keith Tidball and Dr. Marianne Krasney of the Cornell Initiative for Civic Ecology; its goal is to enhance the resiliency of military families and communities dealing with the deployment cycle and assist with reunion and reintegration into the community. The project is building upon the *Defiant Gardens* idea that gardens can be sites of assertion and affirmation. It is a demonstration project that, ideally, will spread to other communities.

Similar projects have been instigated elsewhere. A garden recently planted at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in East Orange, New Jersey, has produced over one thousand pounds of vegetables, but equally important has been the therapeutic effect of gardening upon former soldiers. The Gardening Leave program at Auchincruive, the home of the Scottish Agricultural College, is a horticulture-therapy program for veterans with mental health problems, but it is also seen by those who participate in it as a form of gardening R & R. George Collins has lived in a residential home for veterans ever since he was gravely injured by a roadside bomb in Northern Ireland in 1971. He says that coming to the garden helps him think more clearly: "What I really enjoy here is actually doing some physical work, it helps me mentally. It gets the brain to tick over." There is a symbolic connection as well, for Auchincruive is the site the National Poppy Collection, and in Britain the red poppy is the symbolic reminder of soldiers who died in wartime.

Last September Colleen Sheehy, the director of the Plains Art Museum, helped to organize a defiant-gardening symposium in Fargo, North Dakota, to inaugurate a multi-year project. A dozen writers, artists, landscape architects, and public artists spent several days discussing the concept of defiant gardens, listening to talks about Fargo and its history, and experiencing the dramatic and harsh landscape of the Northern Plains. We then toured the city looking for sites for potential defiant-gardens projects that could be proposed – and, hopefully, constructed – in the near future. In addition, a group of students at North Dakota State University, under the direction of landscape-architecture professor Stevie Famulari, came up with their own proposals for defiant gardens in Fargo.

Because I have received so many responses from individuals that I felt should be shared with a wider audience – about everything from the Civil War to the Gulag – I set up a website (http://www.defiantgardens.com) to collect and communicate this material. The book and the website have also become the subject of numerous blogs on the World Wide Web, written by garden aficionados, urban activists, therapists, and artists. It is a testament to the depth of the meaning of gardens for individuals as places of work and hope. One blogger wrote, "What I saw in some of the pictures of these soldiers and Holocaust survivors was our will to exist, our ability to truly grow beauty out of chaos, despair, adversity, and pain. . . . Why would growing a garden be an act of defiance? From the depths of these people's hearts, as they were taken to their most primordial essence in light of heinous devilry, as they went into the depth of darkness, as they then looked out from within, they saw clearly the beauty of culture, and the refined reflection of nature, as an expression of the depths of their hearts. The expression of these gardens, the work, the watch, the tending of them, was pure defiance, a need to create beauty from the baseness of unacceptable behavior." Not surprisingly, many bloggers address the defiant-gardens concept in the context of community gardening, guerilla gardening, and school gardens programs. They celebrate gardeners' resourcefulness, imagination, and creativity as well as the impact of gardens on individuals and communities. The book has even been the subject of sermons.

I have asked myself why *Defiant Gardens* has had this exceptional range of responses – and from such diverse quarters. I think it is because the book articulates deeply felt emotions that many people have about gardens and gardening but are unable to express. It validates an activity that is too often trivialized, although it in fact has profound meaning for those who plant, maintain, and even just appreciate gardens. Gardens are alive, they are a connection to home, they embody hope, and they are places of meaningful work and great artistry. These are commonplace themes, but the meaning of each is magnified in wartime. Surely the response has also been intensified by the times we live in: our burgeoning concern for the environment; the economic crisis; and the fact that we are a nation at war. At this historical moment, there is a yearning for optimism and assertive, positive action, and the defiant garden is a catalyst for that – particularly in the public arena. May it continue to be, offering us a model for action and inspiration in the face of whatever challenges lie ahead.
– Kenneth I. Helphand

Garden of Senor Luis Antonio Medina, Bogota, Colombia 2009. Photograph: Kenneth Helphand.

To read numerous first-hand accounts of various types of defiant gardens and find an extensive list of resources relating to the subject, visit the Defiant Gardens website: www.defiantgardens.com.