

Rebecca Hawkins

Konin Chapter Analysis

3/4/13

In the book *Konin: One Man's Quest for a Vanished Community*, Theo Richmond travels to the United States, Europe, and Israel tracing and interviewing Jewish survivors of the town of Konin. He tells their stories in an attempt to gain an understanding of Konin, this place he heard so much about as a child. In doing this he reawakens memories of this town, which vanished during Nazi occupation. Each of the chapters focuses on a person whom he interviewed and that informant's memories and stories about Konin. Each person brings up themes of joy, suffering, and survival. One of the chapters that specifically demonstrate these themes is chapter 44, which focuses on the survivor Miriam Grossman and her husband Ignac.

The chapter begins with Theo's first encounter with Miriam and Ignac at the Omaha airport. Theo describes Miriam as a, "small, gray-haired woman. Pale eyes behind planish spectacles ... Someone who would rather merge than stand out" (Richmond, 269). Immediately the reader is intrigued and begins to question who Miriam is and what circumstances she has been through. He then goes on to describe the dynamic between Miriam and her husband Ignac. Theo states, "Miriam and Ignac are an odd couple: he gruff, unpolished, and inarticulate, she neat and refined, expressing herself in a perfect, slightly formal English spoken with a soft and beguiling Polish-American accent" (Richmond, 269). This again causes the reader to question the couple's situation and how they came together, since they appear to be so vastly different.

Once Theo is settled in the house he begins to reveal more about Miriam and Ignac. He explains that Miriam is different from most of the other Koniner's because she listens and that there is a maternal kindliness to her. However, a few sentences later he states, "Her eyes can look unutterably sad one moment, then light up with amusement the next" (Richmond, 271). This again intrigues the reader and causes him to want to know more about who Miriam is and what circumstances have made her this way.

Miriam shifts the focus to Ignac and explains that he was an engineering machinist in Czechoslovakia before the war and he has always worked in a workshop. She explains that he has problems with the English language and that it bothers him. She states that his health is deteriorating and he is in a lot of pain but does not make a fuss about it because, "there are other, more longstanding problems" (Richmond, 271). This illustrates that there are other bigger issues or problems rather than his health, which causes the reader to want to know more about his circumstances. Later on when Miriam, Ignac and Theo are eating dinner Theo discovers that they have lived in the same house for thirty-five years and that they fixed it up completely, doing the "plumbing, electrical wiring, woodwork, everything with their own hands" (Richmond 272). This illustrates that the couple is hard-working and is dedicated to this house, revealing some possible character traits of theirs.

After dinner Miriam begins to talk to Theo about her memories of Konin. Once he shows her his Konin street map it "triggers a chain reaction of memory and suddenly the map becomes a route back to her childhood" and the "distant past comes surging into the present" (Richmond 272). Theo shows her the memory book and as she is looking through it becomes clear that these memories give her great joy. She exclaims, "Oh! I

would love to have this book! I would love to have it!” (Richmond 273). She seems to be excited by the book and the joyful memories that the book produces. She begins to reveal various aspects about her life in Konin. She explains that she grew up in a beautiful, middle class Chasidic home.

She describes various aspects of great joy within the Jewish culture in Konin. One thing that she focused on was the way that people prayed in the *shtibl*: “In the *shtibl* they just went wild with rejoicing, and we liked this emphasis on the happiness, how the Chasidim could find such joy and make merry” (Richmond 276). This illustrates an aspect of Jewish life in Konin that provoked great joy throughout. She explains that even though women could not participate she “used to stand with the woman who gathered at the entrance of the *shtibl* to look inside and see the joy” (Richmond 276). It is clear that this joyful praising and worshipping carries throughout society even though not all members can partake in the act.

Later these joyful memories are juxtaposed against her descriptions about her experiences at Auschwitz. She starts admitting the unreliability of memory: she is “not sure of the date: it is like a film with three exposures on it, so many impressions imposed on other impressions” (Richmond 279). This implies that these memories of Auschwitz flow together in a continuum of struggle and sadness rather than standing apart as distinct memories. She describes the last time that she saw her family when they were separated at Auschwitz. She states, “they were naked—standing, bodies pressed together as they were taken away. The picture will never fade from my mind” (Richmond 279). This is one of the strongest memories of the chapter. Here the description is vivid and heartbreaking and causes the reader to experience great sadness.

However, it becomes clear that this heartbreaking experience is only a glimpse into the hardship she has experienced. She explains how she got sick while working in a factory: “I was so ill that one day we were standing for roll call and I just dropped to the ground, and they picked me up like a piece of rag and they threw me in the corner, just to die” (Richmond 280). This is another passage that causes the reader to question the humanity of the Nazi soldiers working in the camps. It also makes the reader feel for Miriam and provides more of a look into what her life was like for this period of time.

Through all these experiences she continues to remain strong in her faith and feels no animosity towards the Nazis. She explains: “It made me aware of the cruelty which is in people. I feel justice should be done to those criminals who have been caught, and I am upset when it is not done. But I do not have revenge in me. Revenge would change me to being one of them” (Richmond 280). This illustrates what an inspirational individual Miriam is. She continues to be a survivor, yet she has moved on from these experiences blaming no one except the criminals.

She goes on to rationalize her circumstances and affirms that not a day goes by when she does not remember and try to live for the people that are no longer living: “It doesn’t go out of my mind. I am living a normal life and yet I am not. And as for my husband, not one day goes by that he will not speak about the losses, the horrors and the cruelties”(Richmond 281). This clearly illustrates that these memories and circumstances still affect her everyday and that both Miriam and her husband make a conscious decision to honor and remember these losses daily.

Later during dinner Miriam describes how she and Ignac came to Omaha in 1949: “we did not know where Omaha was, what Omaha is. But we said we will go to the end

of the earth so long as we can build a new life” (Richmond 282). This demonstrates the resilient spirit that Miriam and Ignac had. All they wanted was a new beginning and were willing to do anything to get there. This is an inspirational character trait that Miriam, Ignac and many other victims of the Holocaust possessed.

This pairing of Miriam and Ignac’s past hardship with their mundane activities in Omaha represents a unique situation that Richmond draws upon throughout the chapter. He describes how “the conversation switches back and forth, from nightmare past to the mundane present and then back again into the darkness” (Richmond 284). This juxtaposition of horrible past memories and experiences with a quiet life in Kansas illustrates an aspect of survival that many victims of the Holocaust had to face. The issue is how to find a way to move on, while still honoring the memories of the lost, and how to create a new life after being subject to these horrible atrocities.

This chapter is very interesting because Miriam and Ignac represent this unique situation in every aspect of their life. Richmond does an excellent job of bringing out this juxtaposing of memories and life situations. He states: “the house is silent. Below, two old people lie in their double bed. Are they awake, thinking of their bunks at Auschwitz? Or worrying about what to give me for lunch” (Richmond 284). This sentence sums up the situation perfectly. These two people who are living such a normal life now had previously experienced such atrocities, which causes people to question how they contain all these memories and how they find the strength to move on. It is this juxtaposition of happiness, sadness and mundane experiences that combine to make Miriam and Ignac such a unique and memorable couple.

The chapter goes on to describe how Miriam and Ignac met and other fond memories of Konin but then returns to this theme of memories and finding a way to survive. Miriam describes their feelings in more detail. She states, “Yes, we do live with it, but since we are still blessed with life and were given enough strength to have conquered all this...we must appreciate that, and that feeling of appreciation makes our pain a little more bearable” (Richmond 291). This provided Theo and the reader with more understanding of how Miriam and Ignac continue to move on and live with all these past memories. Miriam explains, “I myself cannot understand how I can smile, how I can laugh, can enjoy things, but I suppose that we are endowed with this quality to be able to survive” (Richmond 291). These passages demonstrate how Miriam and Ignac can live such a mundane life even though they have experienced such hardships in the past, which illuminate their unique character traits. They have such gratitude for being able to survive and have a quiet life now that causes them to focus on the important things that they have.

Chapter 44 in Konin is important because it focuses on the theme of past Holocaust survivors finding a way to survive while honoring those past memories and experiences. It tells the story of Miriam and her husband Ignac and what their life is like in Omaha, Kansas. Richmond does a great job of telling their story and illustrating their strong character and how they continue to survive despite all these hardships. This chapter is a great deal longer than the others, which draws importance to this story and the theme of survival both on an individual and broader scale. In this chapter Richmond, draws the reader in by creating a suspenseful atmosphere. He engages the reader by setting up a mystery of who Miriam and Ignac are and what their story is. Throughout the

chapter he slowly reveals clues that allow the reader to gain a complete appreciation of their story and experiences. He ends with illustrating not just how Miriam and Ignac continue to survive with these memories but on a broader scale how victims of the Holocaust continue to survive.