

Prophet—the Hatmaker’s Son, by Douglas Gillies
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A biography of Robert Muller, former Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, who was raised on the French/German border in the 1920-30’s and fought in the French Resistance before joining the United Nations in 1948.

This compact and clearly written biography begins in the middle of Robert Muller’s career at the United Nations when he visits the People’s Republic of China in 1972. Muller is puzzled why he would be singled out for the privilege of accompanying UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim. It is an effective opening hook that reveals Muller’s behind-the-scenes importance at the UN—the Chinese insisted that he attend—while it shows the depth of character and foresight that lead people to call him a prophet. Going back to the 1920’s, the story traces Muller’s development as a child growing up in war-torn Alsace-Lorraine, a border region where a long succession of wars between France and Germany has blurred the lines and left the family with one foot in each country. Nationalism seems like a curse on the border. Muller attends French public schools, but his parents speak German and their parents speak French—all without anyone moving. One thing they agree upon is that war is never a solution. The family tries to keep Robert out of the Nazi army while they maneuver to avoid deportation to a concentration camp.

With a mixture of defiance and humor, Muller dodges the Nazi draft for four years while attending classes at the University of Heidelberg. When Muller tries to escape to France, he is captured in a moonlit field by a Gestapo search party and thrown in a suffocating prison. He keeps his spirits up by scratching out a romantic story on a corroded metal door. After weeks in the cramped cell he is released and returns home, where he plans his eventual escape to France on a midnight train. Working undercover for the Resistance in the Vichy government, he is trapped in a hotel attic when Gestapo police surround the building and methodically search for him. Muller boldly walks up to the commanding officer in the lobby and declares that he just saw himself on the third floor. The Germans charge upstairs. He slips away on a bicycle and joins a combat unit in the hills near Lyon.

Returning to his unit after the liberation of Lyon, Muller learns that 20 young Germans who surrendered to him were senselessly executed. He swears that night to work the rest of his life for peace. He searches for a way to pursue his dream in post-war Europe, even as his father chastises him for giving up the family profession. “You will have to marry a rich girl just to put food on the table!” Muller enters an essay contest while finishing law school at the University of Strasbourg and wins an internship to the new United Nations. Finding himself in a powerless international organization, he returns to France three years later to run for Parliament on the same ticket with Charles de Gaulle, hoping that national politics will give him richer opportunities to work for peace. After the humiliating defeat of his party and a chilling clash with de Gaulle, he pledges his life to the United Nations.

Muller returns to New York in 1951 on a salary of \$300 per month. He sets out to build a better world during the lowest ebb in the history of the UN, a time when the Korean War shackles the UN with Cold War politics while the McCarthy Commission sets up shop in the Secretariat headquarters to ferret out Communists. This gripping tale of one man’s struggle for survival shows that war is not the way to achieve a lasting peace while it tells a very personal story about the formation of the United Nations. *Prophet* is a timely epic.