

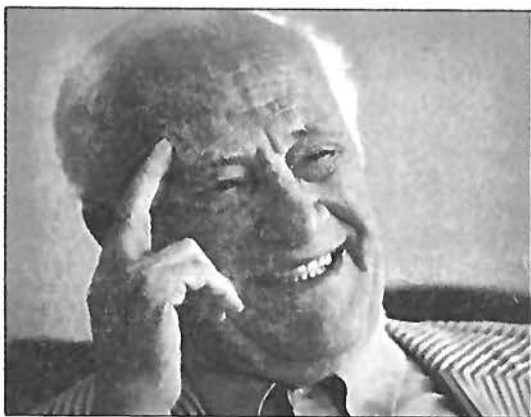
Survival story

Chicago author's optimism remains, 50 years after his release from a Nazi concentration camp and his struggle to find his wife

By Dan Pearson
Correspondent

Fifty years ago this April, Henry Lilienheim was liberated from the infamous Nazi concentration camp at Dachau, near Munich.

While millions perished at the hands of Nazis, this strong-willed native of Warsaw, Poland — now a semi-retired resident of suburban Glencoe — survived to write eloquently about his extraordinary experiences.



Henry Lilienheim said his optimism has remained strong in the 50 years since his release from a Nazi concentration camp.

"The Aftermath: A Survivor's Odyssey Through War-Torn Europe" (DC Books \$22.95/\$12.95) tells the remarkable story of Lilienheim's four years in Nazi-controlled labor and extermination camps. It also details his heart-rending post-war search to locate his wife, Lydia.

Married in Poland in 1939, the couple fled to Russian-occupied Lithuania, only to become prisoners of the advancing German Army and separated.

What makes "The Aftermath" such a fascinating and most-welcome addition to the literature of the Holocaust is the author's nearly unflinching optimism. That positive

spirit and unabashed romanticism was recognized in complimentary quotes on the book's back cover from two Nobel Peace Prize laureates; Holocaust author Elie Wiesel and the Dalai Lama of Tibet.

While the manuscript was originally written in 1947 in Germany — shortly after the arrival of the first of two children born to Lilienheim and his reunited bride — it sat in a drawer for 25 years.

Part of the reason was that Lydia Lilienheim wanted to put the past behind them. A resourceful and practical woman, she once obtained their release from a Russian prison by faking pregnancy. But she preferred her young daughter to grow up a normal child and not be burdened with intimate details of the horrors of the Holocaust.

The story remained untold until the now-grown daughter — award-winning documentary filmmaker Irene Lilienheim Angelico — read the manuscript and decided it was time to dust it off and find a publisher.

Combining elements from short stories Lilienheim had written in the interim with pages added detailing how his wife, Lydia, had managed to survive, "The Aftermath" finally saw print late last fall.

Lilienheim — accompanied by Lydia — will sign copies of "The Aftermath" Saturday from noon to 2 p.m. at the Glencoe Book Shop, 366 Park Ave. in Glencoe. Sunday, he is scheduled to appear at 4 p.m.

at the Old Orchard Barnes & Noble Bookstore, 55 Old Orchard in Skokie.

"I am never satisfied with what I write. I don't think it's adequate," said the far-too-modest author and poet.

From the downtown office of the Chicago law firm where he has been employed as a patent attorney since 1956, Lilienheim, now 87, spoke about the pivotal events in his life more than a half century ago.

He credits his survival in the camps, in part, to the fact he was in his physical prime.

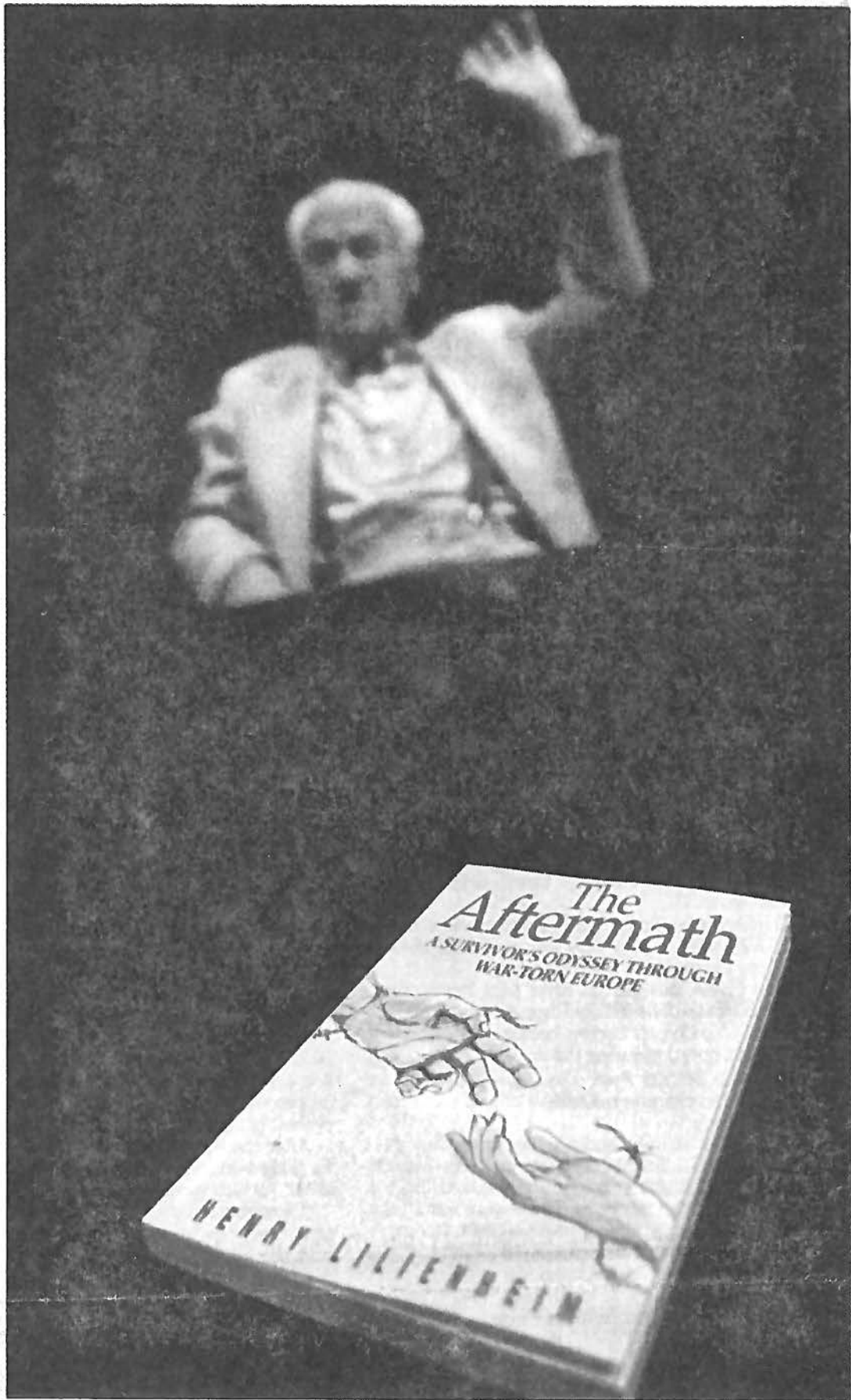
"I was very energetic. I had the will to survive. These are contribut-

ing factors but not essential. Pure chance decided someone's survival. It was mostly luck or fate," he said.

In an attempt to decrease the impossible odds, he made a pact with three other men to share rations and protect each other as best they could under the circumstances.

"Although we were four, we were like the Three Musketeers," he said, smiling fondly. "All for one, and one for all."

He pauses. His face clouds over. "They did not survive. Two of them died in the camps and my closest friend, Dr. (Marek)



Photos by Larry Ruehl/Daily Southtown

Henry Lilienheim has written a book telling his and his wife's tales of survival in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II and their search for each other after the war.

Dworzecki, died after the war (in Israel in the 1970s). He was a great writer. One of the greatest achievements of my life was when I saved his life in the camps."

In the book, Lilienheim details the life-threatening risks he took to secure the necessary medicine for his ailing friend.

"Sometimes in the night I very often see the faces of my friends. And I think of it with emotion. The question often asked is, 'Do you feel guilt?' I do. Why did fate favor me and not others?"

Lilienheim shrugs. There are no words to answer his question.

Another key factor in his survival was his literary skill, which prolonged his life in the camps on many occasions through the gift of extra rations and delayed deportation to the death camps. One darkly comic poem found in "The Aftermath" chastises a single prisoner missing from the all-important roll call, only to be found — luckily — already dead under the bunks.

"It still sounds in my ears. 'Where is the poet? Soup for the poet.' It was a question of survival. It is hard to imagine, but (poetry) touched the hearts of these people, even those so hardened, so cruel. On one occasion I was supposed to be sent to Bergen-Belsen and thanks to my reputation as a poet, I was exempted by the intervention of the kapos (camp officials)."

Lilienthal says, outside of what is quoted in "The Aftermath," he has no immediate plans to have more of his poetry published.

"I write occasionally a poem ... to please myself or express myself. Poetry is not popular in this country. Poets are regarded a little like loonies. There is not much understanding. Poetry is not something that an average American appreciates.

"Someone said to me, 'You don't describe in the book the elation, the happiness (of being liberated).' There was no elation, no

happiness. Dullness. You didn't realize what was happening."

In fact, Lilienheim says many prisoners died after being liberated from the misplaced generosity of food offered the starving survivors by the American troops. A good rich soup could prove as deadly as the German gas chambers to prisoners whose digestive systems had been drastically weakened in the camps.

Trained as a textile engineer in France before the war, Lilienheim was employed within weeks of his release from Dachau as an interpreter for the U.S. Army program for de-Nazification in Bavaria. Thanks to the help of an American major from Vermont, Lilienheim was able to secure the necessary passes and the time to search four European countries for the wife he believed had survived.

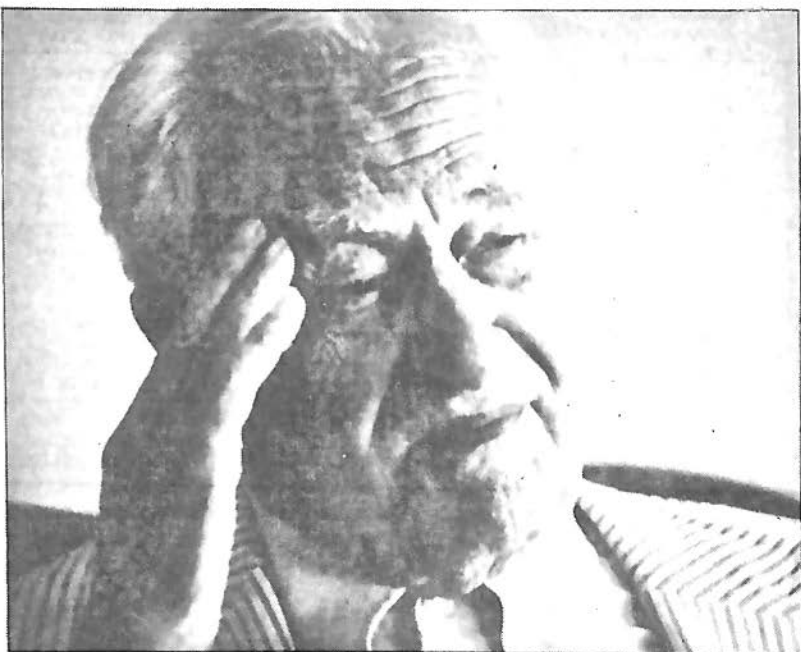
Despite all his many efforts, in the end, it was she who found out his whereabouts first.

Lilienheim, who speaks eight languages, wrote "The Aftermath" in English because he knew he would like to come to the United States someday. That day came in 1949, when he and his wife and their 2½-year-old child arrived in New York. The New York Post published their picture with a caption that announced "refugees reunited."

After finding a job with a New York international patent law firm, he became a lawyer and was transferred to the Chicago office in 1956. After living in Evanston, the Lilienheims moved to Glencoe. Lilienheim still goes downtown to the office one day a week.

"My daughter (who now lives in Canada) is a lovely woman. She discovered the manuscript. The manuscript was not published because there was no interest for this kind of book after the war. She dusted it off but first made a (documentary) movie 'Dark Lullabies,' which won awards at international film festivals."

Released in 1982 in conjunc-



Larry Ruehl/Daily Southtown

Henry Lilienheim answers questions about his experiences and his new book, "The Aftermath: A Survivor's Odyssey through War-Torn Europe." The book tells his story of being held in World War II Nazi concentration camps and his subsequent quest to be reunited with his wife after they were separated by the war.

tion of National Film Board of Canada, "Dark Lullabies" interviewed the children of both Holocaust survivors and children of the German perpetrators. The film, available on video, contains several quotes from her father's book.

In addition to writing the text, Lilienheim also designed the cover of the book, which depicts two human hands — one male, one female — reaching toward each other past strands of barbed wire.

Recent attention to the book has made the Lilienheims celebrities in Glencoe.

"I have this feeling of humility," maintains Lilienheim, "because we cannot answer the questions of the puzzle of life. We have no answers — only questions."

Lilienheim says he has already received positive feedback from readers.

"The feedback is very gratifying. They say I have touched many hearts. This is something that means much to me."

Lilienheim writes that he believes love and friendship are the

greatest gifts one can possess. He is also thankful for a keen sense of humor.

"This helps, but still there is a pain. The wound still festers. I have this sadness in me."

One of the coincidences found in "The Aftermath" is the fact that a debilitating leg injury prevented him from leaving in a bus for Warsaw in the company of a wealthy friend who agreed to pay his fare. All those on that bus were later captured, imprisoned and shot.

Lilienheim chalks the incident up to fate. With so many close calls in his life, he still finds it difficult to believe in the possibility of a guardian angel.

"I wish I could believe many things. If I were religious. I am a skeptic. I am what is called an agnostic. Is there a God or is there not? I would say, 'I don't know.'"

"Do I feel that all Germans are guilty? I say no. I try to find good in the human heart."

"Sometimes," Lilienheim admits, "It is not easy."