

In print

Mark Shainblum

The Iron Box

Last year Tziporah Shnay, director of the Jewish Public Library, told me the JPL was receiving three to five new books *a week* about the Holocaust, and there were many hundreds more being published that they simply could not order and house.

I can easily believe her. In the last few months I've received almost a dozen books on the topic, including *For You Who Died I Must Live On...: Reflections on the March of the Living* (Mosaic, 1993), *Child of the Holocaust* and *After the Smoke Cleared* by Jack Kuper (Stoddart, 1968 and 1994), and *Tell No One Who You Are: The Hidden Childhood of Régine Miller* (Tundra, 1994), written by *Gazette* reporter Walter Buchignani.

With the exception of a column about *Czentochow: Our Legacy* by Harry Klein, I have avoided writing about these books. I have avoided these books, period. I take them home. I open them up. I start to read; and my eyes fill with tears and I get so choked with emotion that I cannot continue.

I seem to be going through a strange kind of role reversal. As the survivors of the Holocaust begin to be able to cope with and record their memories — now 50 years in the past — as my own mother is more able to speak about what happened to her and her family and the Jewish community of 35,000 that simply ceased to be one week in 1944, I find my own emotions more raw, my own grief and rage and guilt that much closer to the surface.

This is not an unknown phenomenon. The psychological after-effects of the Holocaust on survivors and their children are well documented in Helen Epstein's groundbreaking *Children of the Holocaust* (Putnam, 1979) and in other places.

And that is how it was for Irene Lilienheim Angelico as well. Like many children of survivors, she couldn't face the Holocaust at all. She read no books, she saw no films, she didn't even speak about it. "It's not that I was indifferent," she explains. "It's that I was too emotional. I couldn't even handle a little bit. If I inadvertently found myself at a film about the Holocaust I would have to leave.

"And I knew that it was part of my heritage, my legacy," she says. "Helen Epstein described it as an iron box in the pit of her stomach. It was always there.

"I couldn't really cope with it until I came to that certain age where everybody starts to deal with their background," she continues. "Where you just naturally begin to be concerned about your roots and where you came from. For us who are children of survivors, that legacy is just a little heavier."

Exploring the past was somewhat different for Lilienheim Angelico than for other children of survivors, however. Her father, Henry Lilienheim, sat down in 1947 and penned *The Aftermath*, a manuscript written in English, Lilienheim's third or fourth language at the time, about his experiences in the immediate postwar period, after his liberation from the Dachau concentration camp near Munich.

"I wrote the book primarily *because* of an intense desire for expression," Lilienheim explains. "I thought I would find some relief in expressing myself, in putting my turbulent thoughts onto paper. Also, I was thinking of my new-born baby, Irene, thinking that she should know what had happened."

"I had known my father's manuscript was around for some years, but I had never read it. I was petrified to read it," Lilienheim Angelico says, "but when I finally sat down to read it I couldn't stop.

"It's a love story. It wasn't only the horror and pain I expected."

Henry Lilienheim's book, at least in part, inspired his filmmaker daughter to make *Dark Lullabies*, an award-winning 1989 NFB documentary co-produced with her husband, Abbey Jack Neidik. The film — a searing series of interviews with the Jewish children of survivors and the German children of perpetrators — both opens and closes with quotations from her father's manuscript.

And in one of those odd reversals which are not unusual among Holocaust survivors and their children, Irene Lilienheim Angelico's film finally made it possible for her father's book to be published as *The Aftermath: A Survivor's Odyssey Through War-Torn Europe*. The publisher, Montreal's DC Books, is even offering a boxed set which includes both the book and a VHS video of the film.

Ironically, at first Henry Lilienheim was worried about his daughter as she made her film. "I was concerned that it would be a harmful experience, that she would suffer emotionally while making it," he says. "When she told me that she intended to go back to Germany to film, I tried to convince her not to go. If I had known she was going to interview neo-Nazis, I would have tried to convince her not to do this.

"Yet when I saw the film, I realized that it was all necessary for her. I am very proud that my manuscript inspired her to make such a great documentary."