Interview with *Aftermath* author Henry Lilienheim

Mr. Lilienheim, I understand that you wrote *The Aftermath* many years ago. Can you tell me how you came to write it?

Henry: I wrote the original manuscript during several months of 1947, while living in a Munich apartment with my wife, Lydia, and our new-born baby, Irene. I was married before the war, but we were separated during the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto. Then I finally found Lydia – or rather, she found me. We had both miraculously survived inside the camps. While I wrote the book, I watched my baby girl beginning to discover the world. I wrote the book primarily because of an intense desire for expression, as a way to ease my pain. I thought I would find some relief in expressing myself, in putting my turbulent thoughts onto paper. As a writer and poet, this was my way. Also, I was thinking of my child, thinking that she should know what had happened.

What were you doing during that time besides writing *The Aftermath*?

I held three jobs at the time. I worked for the American military government as a special investigator, involved in the so-called denazification. At the same time, I worked for the American Joint Distribution Committee, an organization for refugees, and at another part-time job for the Bavarian government as a consultant to the Office of Jewish Affairs. I was very busy.

How old were you in 1947?

I was born in 1908, so that would make me 39 years old. I know it is not usual for a 39-year-old to write an autobiography, but then I had not lived a very usual life. My experiences during the war had changed me. I wanted to create an historical document. Also, it became a compulsion for me to write about it, the horror of the war, and to preserve the memory of all those who perished, including my parents, my brother, my sister, and my little niece.

I believe that you wrote the manuscript in English, which was not your primary language. Why was that?

My firm intention was to come to America, and I hoped the book would be published there. How else could I write it? In Polish, my first language? That would have made a much smaller audience. And in Israel, they too read English. Also, of course, I knew that my children's language would be English, so they should understand it.

What did Irene think of the book when she read it?

I decided not to pursue the book, mostly because Lydia asked me not to. You see, she did not want our children to know about our suffering in the camps. It was her desire that Irene and Michael grow up to be normal American children, untouched by the bitterness or fear of the camps, without that burden. In her preface to the book, Irene tells the story of how we invented aunts and uncles for her as a child. Still, by some sort of osmosis, she learned about the Holocaust and found that we were survivors of that experience.

So Irene eventually read the manuscript?

Yes. I am not certain how she found it. All I know is that she did read it, when she was already a filmmaker, in her thirties, and it inspired her to make a movie called *Dark Lullabies*.

I've seen the film, which won many awards, and it begins and ends with quotations from *The Aftermath*. Were you pleased with the film?

Not at first. I was concerned that it would be a harmful experience for my daughter, that she would suffer emotionally while making it. 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.

So in a way, reading the manuscript -- which you wrote partly to her when she was in her crib -- brought the two of you closer together?

Yes. It really is a remarkable story, isn't it? It took her over three decades to read what I had written. And because she made me dust off the manuscript and work on it, it is now finally being published. The publisher has put the book and film together in a boxed set.

I wanted to go back to the question of languages. You have indicated that English was not your first language. What was it? Your second? Third?

That is hard to say with precision. I know eight languages, but one has to practice to keep them fresh. My first language was Polish, growing up in Warsaw. I learned some English in my last year of high school, when I fell in love with a girl who was taking English lessons at the university, so I attended, too. But I really did not become proficient with English until I worked with the Americans after the war. When I was 18, I went to study in France, so my third was French, one of my favorites. In school I learned German. When the war started, I was in Russia, so I picked that up. Russian is actually a very tender language, contrary to popular impressions. Then I went to Italy for a trip and taught myself Italian. Then I picked

up a smattering of Spanish, Yiddish, Hebrew. Finally, I learned Chinese through books. I was quite advanced in reading, though I couldn't speak it. After our liberation, I proposed to the American commander that maybe my Chinese would help them, but it was my English that got me out of the camps early, to work for the military government.

Now that so much time has passed, has the pain of the Holocaust lessened for you? Did you find it easy to edit the manuscript after all these years?

No. I don't believe that the pain will ever lessen, and it was very difficult to re-read *The Aftermath*, particularly the scene in which my sister Edwarda and my little seven-year-old niece Misia were taken to their deaths. This is one of the most painful things, the death of my little niece. When you think of an innocent child being destroyed, this is the most painful thing. There is a poem by Bialik that I quote in the book, speaking of the death of a child. I hope that the book has merit, but in reading my own words, I have to relive all of those feelings. They never really go away. I am essentially an optimistic person and I do not like to think negative thoughts, but no one who lived in the camps could ever forget the experience, and it follows us all our lives.

I am sure that you are familiar with the term "Survivor Guilt." Did you feel guilty that you survived when the rest of your family did not?

Yes. I think that all survivors feel such guilt. My best friend in the camps, Marek Dworzecki, wrote about it poignantly in an essay that I quote in my book. His article says, "Midnight. I get up and ask myself the question, how I survived when others died. I am prosecutor and defending attorney at the same time." That question stays with you your whole life.

You mention Marek Dworzecki. He was a very important person for you in the camps, was he not?

He was like my brother. There were four of us who swore loyalty to one another. We were like the three musketeers, one for all and all for one, only there were four of us. It was a beautiful example of friends. Only two of us, Marek and I, survived. I had such a deep love for them. Such tragedy binds you together, one to the other.

After the war, you met Dworzecki again in Paris, didn't you?

Yes. I was looking for Lydia all over Europe, and I stayed for a time with Marek. He tried to convince me that my future lay with the new state of Israel. I met Ben-Gurion and other leaders, as I describe in the book, but I was obsessed with finding my wife. Marek wrote several books and finally emigrated to Israel, where I visited him several times before his death in the 1970s. He always felt that I had made a

major mistake, not going with him to Israel and becoming a leader in the Zionist movement. I often wonder what my life would have been like if I had.

Instead, you came to the United States.

Yes, as I told you, I wanted to raise my children in the land of the liberators, the land of freedom. The first years in America were a hard adjustment. I had been a textile engineer in Europe, but I couldn't use my degree in this country. I tried starting my own business of export/import in NY, but it was unsuccessful. One day I went to the office of a patent attorney in New York City and got a job as a draftsman. I also did translations for this office. After two years, I acquired enough experience to move to a big international patents firm. I was successful, and I was transferred to a branch in Chicago for a higher salary. I went to law school at night for four years, passed the bar and then the patent bar. I also traveled. I started my own business, and opened thirty offices throughout South and Central America Europe, Africa, and Asia. It was called Interplan and involved the exchange of manufacturing licenses and know-how. Now I am 86, and I am semi-retired. I go to the office once a week and pick up work.

Are you excited, now that *The Aftermath* is finally being published, so many years after you wrote it?

Honestly, I don't know how I feel about the book coming out now. I hope it has literary value. I have poetic stirrings, which are partly reflected in the book. I wanted to convey, along with all this horror, that some poetry was still left in my heart. Unlike many other memoirs, I hope the book is also a literary document, not just telling the story of cruelties and atrocities. Everything in the book is completely authentic, though; the facts are as they were. I am not sure about the book's merits or what the critical response will be.

You seem unduly modest, especially when one considers the recommendations on the back of your book. I doubt that there has ever been another book endorsed at the same time by Elie Wiesel and the Dalai Lama, both recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Yes, I am grateful for their endorsements.

But Mr. Lilienheim, people such as this do not lightly endorse literary works, regardless of who approaches them.

Yes, the implication is that they must really like it.

When readers open *The Aftermath*, will they read exactly what you wrote in 1947, or has there been some editing or additions?

The text is substantially the same as when I wrote it in 1947, but there have been some additions. I had written a collection of unpublished short stories called "Echoes." In collaboration with Irene, her husband Abbey, and writer Mark Pendergrast, I worked some of those stories into the book. For instance, the story of Feferberg's failed escape plans and my broken leg came from that collection. We also worked on smoothing out some of my English usage. Also, we cut out a lengthy passage of philosophical discourse. It was interesting, but it did not really belong in this book.

Now I want to ask you about some painful subjects, but readers will want to know about them. At the beginning of the war, you left your parents in Warsaw, and you were never to see them again. Did you have any idea that would happen?

No, of course not. We didn't imagine the atrocities and killings that would take place in Warsaw later; we didn't know. Why would the Nazis bother with older people? We knew that Jews would be persecuted, but that the war would come to an end. We always believed the Germans would be defeated. So we could only suffer through it, and then we would return and see our parents again. We had no idea that we would never see them again.

One of the most affecting passages in the book is when you return to Warsaw to look for Lydia, and you walk through the shattered remnants of your childhood and recall your parents.

Yes, I realized that I could never make my home again in Warsaw. It was a graveyard, and the hatred for Jews was still there. I am still powerfully affected by reading that section of the book. The Poles hated the Germans, but most Poles were indifferent or even had pleasure in the suffering of the Jews. On the other hand, there were cases of great nobility and sacrifice, of Poles risking their lives and the lives of their families for hiding a Jew. That was maybe 5% of the population. These were righteous people.

What are other sections of the book that you feel are particularly strong?

I am fond of the scene when I first walked outside the camps and lay underneath a tree and watched a grasshopper. Then in the Warsaw scene, I love the flashback to the birthday party with my parents; it makes me feel warm. I like the Prontosil story in which I saved my friend Marek's life by getting him pills. The scene when I fell to the earth and wanted to be swallowed by it. The flashback story, "One Morning," is a good evocation of a typical day in the camps.

Your book also made me consider the question of survival. What characteristics contributed to survival?

I am convinced that 95% of survival was luck; at any moment, anything could happen. It was a matter of chance. The rest was energy and the will to survive, to adjust to any situation. I was very adaptable and energetic. I was in my prime, the best years of my life, and I had a strong will to survive. I was known as an "Organizer." I would dash into the fields to get vegetables and would run back before I was shot. Today, I wouldn't survive one week. Also, I was lucky, above all. I was favored by people who in the camps were important, the kapos. I was respected by the cook, the doctor. I was known as a poet. It's interesting that in this environment my poetry was liked. The man who distributed soup would yell, "Where is the poet? Soup for the poet." There was a critical time I describe in the book when I had swollen feet. They were making selections for Bergen Belsen, which was like a death sentence, and I was selected, but the camp dignitaries got me released, because of my poetry.

So even in the camps, the human craving for creativity and entertainment prevailed. Another survival characteristic involved maintaining friendships, it seems to me.

Absolutely. As I already described, the four of us vowed to help one another. Without Marek, I would have died, and without me, he would have died. But even though we tried our best, we could do nothing to save the other two.

Your wife Lydia's experience also bore that out. Her friendship with another woman helped her to escape, finally, didn't it?

Yes. I should have mentioned that the chapter in which Lydia recounts her experience in the camps was not in the original manuscript. Because she did not want to make her story public, I had left it out. Mark Pendergrast interviewed her only recently, and her character and courage come through strongly. She was determined to maintain her dignity. For instance, she would trade her soup for a piece of soap in order to keep clean. The story of her escape while going on a death march is remarkable. She tells how an elderly German soldier deliberately shot over her head. She was there, at the historic moment, when the American and Russian armies converged and met. She was exactly there, crossing the River Elbe bridge. Lydia was very brave and would never give up.

One of the themes that shines throughout the book is the humanity and courage of the Jews in the camps. I thought this was important, because so many critics have portrayed the poor Jews as hapless, almost willing victims.

That's a very important point. Some people said that the Jews went to their deaths like sheep, but that's unfair. There was nothing we could do. If you rebelled, you would be killed immediately. It would have been a romantic, hopeless gesture, but it would also have repercussions for others, because the Germans would execute 100

for every one who dared to resist. When we lived in the Vilna ghetto, some young people would escape to the forest and become members of Polish resistance groups. I considered doing that, but my heart was torn to leave my wife and sister for dead, so I stayed with them.

The Romans gave to the world the concepts of the Law, the Greeks - the idea of Beauty, and the Jews - the Ethics. The Sermon on the Mount is the emanation of the Jewish spirit. Moses gave us the idea of Justice, then came the Prophets and Jesus. The irony is that Jesus, the Jew, would be the first to die in the concentration camps.

In your Afterword, you seem to have assigned a meaning to life, though.

That is true. I speak of the value of love and friendship. I value friendship, which has played a great role in my life. Sometimes I think that I should be grateful that I am not hungry or poor. Other times, sorrows of my life oppress me. Sometimes I become depressed. Fortunately, I have a keen sense of humor. I tell myself jokes and I start laughing.

You've been very generous with your time. Let me ask just one more question. Do you feel that the Holocaust was a unique event? Or does attempted genocide happen throughout history?

My answer must be yes and no. Unique in that the Germans attempted to exterminate all of the Jews in Europe. They succeeded in killing six million people, nearly one-third of all the Jews alive in the world at the time. That was unprecedented, and it was planned and scientifically carried out in one of the supposedly civilized countries of the world.

On the other hand, I don't want my book to be regarded as simply the story of what happened to the Jews. I would like the book to be of universal appeal, not only to Jews but to everybody. I identify myself as a Jew, but I see that people are the same everywhere, with the same aspirations, the same sufferings, regardless of religion or nationality. When the Holocaust becomes exclusively associated with Jewish suffering, it has the potential of denying the suffering of others. I want to speak of evil and violence as a general problem.

Thank you so much for speaking with me today, Mr. Lilienheim.

The pleasure was mine. As they say in Yiddish, "Sei Gesind." Be healthy.