

Post-war love published after 50 years

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After being reunited with his wife in post-war Europe, Holocaust survivor Henry Lilienheim penned a manuscript describing his experiences, in part to alleviate his pain, and also so his newborn daughter, Irene, would know what happened.

Now, almost 50 years later, due in part to Irene's efforts, this Glencoe resident's story has finally been published.

The book titled "**The Aftermath**" (1994, D.C. Books, Montreal, \$22.95) details Lilienheim's forced separation from his wife and family during the war, his survival through seven concentration camps in four years, and his subsequent liberation. But the book is mostly a love story, focusing on his obsessive quest to find his wife, Lydia, who miraculously survived five camps.

"I wanted to see my wife, but I was a prisoner," Lilienheim said. "I could only hope that some day I would see her, if I survived."

That hope, coupled with the knowledge that the rest of his family had perished, propelled him to search with single-minded intensity through 12 cities across war-torn Europe.

"I was desperate sometimes, but I didn't give up hope," Lilienheim said. "I hoped she would be alive. The chances were not big, because such a small percentage of people survived, so it was really miraculous that we both survived."

After they found each other and began to rebuild their lives, Lilienheim wrote "**The Aftermath**." He wrote the book in English, even though it was not his first language, because he knew he wanted to emigrate to America, to raise his family in the "land of the liberators," and have the book published here.

On hold

The book didn't find a publisher at that time, so Lilienheim put the manuscript away for 25 years, until he gave it to his daughter. Several years later, she worked up the courage to read it.

"What I read amazed me," Irene Lilienheim Angelico writes in the foreword to "**The Aftermath**." "This was not just a story of horror and grief, as I had expected, but a powerful and moving story of love and hope, as well. Its scope was as vast as the greatest tragedy in human history, and as intimate as a man's unswerving search for his wife after a journey through hell."

After reading the manuscript, Irene, a filmmaker, was inspired to make a film about the next generation - about the children of survivors and perpetrators - titled "**Dark Lullabies**." She also encouraged her father to work on the manuscript again, so that it would be published.

Finally seeing his book in print is bittersweet for Lilienheim - it is satisfying, yet full of painful memories. "I am happy to see the book published," he said. "People ask me questions about life in the concentration camps. 'Do you remember the past?' The answer is, yes, I do. The past is something which can never be forgotten. "Another thing they ask me is, if the survivors feel guilt. They do. The guilt is because they survived and the others did not."

Lilienheim, 87, says that he is alive today only through pure chance. "I could as well not have survived," he said. "There were worthy people who perished. Why did they perish? No one knows."

Poetry helped

Lilienheim knows that his writing talent helped him survive on at least one occasion.

"I was known and respected in the camps as a poet," he said. "The camp dignitaries, the kapos, had some influence. When I was chosen to be sent to Bergen Belsen, which at the time was equivalent to a death sentence, these dignitaries influenced the German S.S. not to send me. Also, the reputation of a poet helped me when sometimes I got more food. It still sounds in my ears, the distributor of soup screaming, 'Where is the poet? Soup for the poet!'"

Lilienheim brought his family to America in 1949, when Irene was 2 1/2 years old. He got a job in the office of a New York City patent attorney, where he learned the profession'.

The family, which grew to also include a son, Michael, ended up in Glencoe when Lilienheim was transferred to the Chicago branch of an international law firm for which he was working. He worked during the day and earned his law degree at night. He eventually created his own international firm.

Lilienheim says his success came from his inborn drive, enterprise and energy - traits the Holocaust couldn't crush.

Lilienheim still works part time, taking work home from the office once a week, but he is more interested in his writing. He regrets he didn't dedicate himself to writing professionally earlier in his life.

"Unfortunately, I'm never happy with what I write," he said. "I also suffer from writer's block, and what I write does not please me. It could be better."

Not everyone agrees. Two Nobel peace prize laureates have endorsed Lilienheim's book: Elie Wiesel, who called the book "an important contribution to the literature of Holocaust testimony," and the Dalai Lama.

Despite all he has been through, Lilienheim still tries, to find the good in human nature. He says the greatest, evil is indifference, lack of empathy.

"We have to sympathize with others," he said. "We have to have compassion, not evil. This is what my mind is searching for."

But, as Lilienheim writes, love and friendship comprise the most precious gift in life. Without them, life is "meaningless, devoid of everything that warms and stirs the heart." He writes that people are the happiest when they share their lives with others, when they have warm relationships.

Lilienheim will be featured at two book signings this summer: July 15 at Glencoe Book Shop, 366 Park Ave.' and July 16 at Barnes and Noble, Old Orchard.