

## **We did not perish**

Susan Schwartz  
*The Gazette*

He sat down in 1941 after his liberation from the German concentration camp of Dachau, to write the story of how he survived the Holocaust. Henry Lilienheim was 39 and he was writing, he said, mainly in the hope that expressing himself would bring relief from his pain.

He and his wife, Lydia, had been separated during the liquidation of the Vilno ghetto in Poland, miraculously survived the camps and found each other after the war.

They were living in a Munich apartment with their newborn daughter, Irene, and Lilienheim was writing for her too, thinking that she should know what happened. He wrote in English, although it was not his first language, because he knew he wanted to go to America, and for the book to be published there.

"I wanted to create a historical document ... 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," he said.

As it happened 25 years before Lilienheim gave his daughter the manuscript that had been written in part for her and several years before she even dared to read it.

And it was this month, nearly 50 years after it was written, that it was published as **The Aftermath** by the Montreal publisher DC Books.

The Lilienheims came to North America in 1949. Henry, who had a prewar French engineering degree, apprenticed in the office of a patent lawyer as a technical draftsman and translator, Lydia worked in a medical laboratory. Then the family moved to Chicago, where he worked during the day and went to law school at night and embarked on a career as a patent attorney.

## **Children were shielded**

Lydia Lilienheim didn't want the children, Irene and Michael, to know about the Holocaust.

"My mother decided when I was born that I should grow up as a happy, normal child, free from any thought of the horrors they had experienced in the Holocaust," Irene Lilienheim writes in the forward to **The Aftermath**.

My father did not entirely agree that I should not be told anything, though he went along with her decision. But the Holocaust was too large for even my mother to hide."

With survivor friends filling in as aunts, uncles, cousins and surrogates for those who had perished, the Holocaust remained a forbidden subject at home. As a young adult, Angelico did not discuss it or read about it or see films about it. But it has always been a part of her, she said. "My feelings about the Holocaust were so intense that I was not able to deal with them. The Holocaust was burning inside me."

Angelico, a Montrealer, had already embarked on a career as a film-maker when she watched an interview with Albert Speer, minister of armaments in the Third Reich. The interview, she said, jolted her consciousness. She took her father's manuscript down from the shelf.

"What I read amazed me. 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."

Reading her father's story inspired her to make **Dark Lullabies**, an award-winning film about her attempt, as she says at its outset, to understand the experience that separates me from my parents."

Reading her father's story also led her to convince him to work on his manuscript again after so many years.

Her film, an affecting voyage of discovery featuring remarkable interviews with Holocaust survivors and their children as well as with children of the Nazi Perpetrators, opens with the beginning her father's manuscript. He is in Dachau.

"Ra-tatata-ta. The growl of machine guns. From time to time the distant roar of cannons. I am lying on the third tier of a bed of boards. I am cold. I have covered my head with a blanket. I think of food and then, with indifference. I realize that this is perhaps the last day of my slavery, or of my life. Have only four years passed? The night of 29th of April, 1945 Will I be a free man tomorrow? I do not know; I am tired of thinking. All I want is not to be hungry."

Lilienheim credits his daughter for having encouraged him to dust off his manuscript after nearly half a century. In her, he said, he sees his mother's sensitivity and empathy. "She would read your heart and mind. This warmth and empathy breeds confidence. The sensitivity makes her vulnerable. I often think of my mother."

His daughter and her husband, a Filmmaker, helped substantially with the editing and the flow of the manuscript, he said. They encouraged him to use the successful device of writing in the present tense as he described the postwar period and to set the past in the form of flashbacks.

Earlier this month, Lilienheim, still a busy patent attorney at 86, was in Montreal with Lydia for the book's launch. I asked what it felt like to see his work published, 47 years after it was written. "I can't define my feelings," he answered. "There is satisfaction to see one's experiences described in print but on the other hand, it depresses me when I leaf through it. I remember."

### **Why did it happen?**

"And there are the questions to which I don't find answers: Why did it happen? What is the nature of evil? Does God exist? Do we live after we die or are we, as I say in the book, a conglomeration of atoms which will disintegrate and vanish?"

It is Lilienheim's hope that his work will have widespread appeal, will be read by audiences other than survivors and their families.

At his office, he said, some colleagues tell him there is too much emphasis on Jewish suffering, on the Holocaust, on the fact that it is spelled with a capital H. They cite Cambodia, the Gulag, the slaughter of the Armenians. He tells them, he said, that there is no comparison, that it is unprecedented in history for people to have been persecuted and exterminated for no reason other than that they were Jews.

The book ends the way **Dark Lullabies** did, in a birth out of death. "The first snow has fallen and everything is white. The pendulum of time moves rhythmically. My wife has borne a child. As I bend by the bed of my little daughter, I do not know whether I love her. But when she smiles for the first time, my heart is filled with sweet feelings. As I look at her, it seems to me I see my mother, my father, my sister, my little niece. I see Lydia's parents. I see a reflection of myself.

"Our child has come into the world because we did not perish in the camps, and one link has given hand to another."