

## **CBT Library Highlights: Holocaust Remembrance Day and Yom HaAtzmaut, April 2010**

The Lone Survivor: A Diary of the Lukacze Ghetto and Svyniukhy, Ukraine

By Michael Diment, translated from the original Yiddish by Shmuel (Diment) Yahalom

The Holocaust Library, 1992

In conjunction with Holocaust Memorial Day, the CBT library is privileged to have obtained a copy of the WWII diary of Michael Diment a'h. His son, Shmuel Yahalom, is a member of our congregation and the translator of his father's book. It is an important document not only for its precision regarding dates, people and events but for the remarkable fact that it was largely written contemporaneously with these events and not long afterwards, as many survivors' personal histories are. Mr. Diment recorded history as it was happening on scraps of paper which were smuggled to a friend's house and then returned to him at the end of the war. Mr. Diment set about piecing them together while in internment in Cyress and the diary was ready for publication in 1947. The book is divided into five major sections: the invasion of Germany, ghetto-ization in Lukacze, the slaughter of the ghetto inhabitants, survival in the forests and fields of the region, and liberation by the Russians. These events transpired between July, 1941 - April, 1944.

Born in 1915, Michael Diment lived with his family in a small town in the Ukraine called Svyniukhy. The region consisted of more than 5000 small Jewish communities, some with only a few hundred people in them. Their neighbors were Ukrainians, Poles and Gypsies. The Ukraine had been the scene of many *pogroms* and anti-Semitic decrees over the centuries, the most recent being under Petlura during WWI. There were all classes of people from peasants to intellectuals and Communists and many Ukrainians who sought a return to national independence. Suspicion and hatred were sometimes openly expressed, sometimes veiled below the surface. The start of the war found the Jews and their neighbors existing in relative peace. Many Jews were craftsmen (Mr. Diment's father was a blacksmith) who provided needed services to the Gentiles in town. Some Jews owned farms, mills, and businesses.

The book opens on July 22, 1941, the day the German army invaded the region. At first, the Germans passed through the area on their way to the Russian front. But afterwards they established a regional headquarters in Horochow, periodically issuing decrees which were carried out by the local Ukrainian politicians and their militia. Over the next few months, between the harsh German orders and the Ukrainian opportunists making the most of the situation, the Jews were systematically harassed, beaten, robbed and thrown out of their houses and businesses. They were able to survive largely by bribing the locals for food and other necessities. There were a few

townspeople who tried to assist, most notably the local priest, but most stood by indifferently or joined the frenzy.

By November, 1941, the second stage of terror had begun. The Jews were moved to the nearby town of Lukacze where a ghetto was established for them and the Jews of area. Trading with the outside became increasingly more difficult and they were further stripped of most of their furniture, bedding, tools, food, and extra clothing as the Germans and Ukrainians 'requisitioned' their goods and set up work gangs to service the Gentile homes and to do hard labor in the forests and fields. As was typical, a *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) was established to be the official go-between with those in charge. This was part of the psychological torture which the Nazis practiced. Demands for goods and worker quotas were the council's responsibility. In turn, they tried to obtain more outside passes and to negotiate the release of Jewish prisoners with their captors. After the Jewish ghetto was decimated by hunger and disease and nearly emptied of all goods and money, rumors of nearby mass killings and ghetto liquidations reached them in August 1942. They understood that their time was limited. Some managed to escape but most remained helplessly imprisoned, awaiting their fate. Mr. Diment successfully fled with a few friends to the forest, leaving the rest of his family behind in the ghetto, and spent the remainder of the war in the forest or moving between the homes and barns of friends in his area. As he well knew, gangs of Ukrainians and Nazis were hunting down and killing Jews anywhere they could find them. Anyone hiding or assisting Jews were in mortal danger themselves. Nonetheless, he was sheltered and helped by friends and acquaintances as best they could. His friends finally helped him to cross the border into Russia where he was liberated. Mr. Diment was one of only six survivors from Svyniukhy and the lone survivor of his family. After being mobilized into the Russian Army, Mr. Diment went to Poland and joined a group of Jews who were smuggled out to Cypress where he awaited *aliyah* to Israel.

I suggest that you read this book just slightly out of order. After completing the Preface and Chapter One (Introduction), I would recommend that you skip to the appendices at the back of the book before resuming the chronological story in Chapter Two. Appendix II describes how Mr. Diment's collected his testimony and what he underwent to preserve his diary under very difficult conditions. I think it gives the reader an extra appreciation of the material which constitutes the heart of the book. It will also explain why the story is a little disjointed at times and why some people and places are not fully introduced or explained.

As horrific as his experience and as miraculous as his survival was, Mr. Diment's inability to publish his diary after the war is the continuation of his tale. In a brief, understated, but poignant statement (see Appendix III), Mr. Diment describes the post-war atmosphere in Israel and the coldness with which the survivors were treated. Israel and the Jewish world were busy building 'the new Jew' and fighting off their regional enemies. They had little patience or understanding for what the remnants of European

Jewry had experienced. After surviving Hell itself, the survivors often felt ostracized by others who saw them as weaklings, going like 'sheep to the slaughter.' As is abundantly clear from the book, the Jews were systematically deprived of any means of resistance and subject to physical deprivation and psychological terror, making it nearly impossible for anyone to fight back. That was a cornerstone of the Nazi plan and was systematically implemented in every region they conquered. Blaming the victim afterwards was cruel and untrue and extremely damaging to the survivors. Mr. Diment was not able to find a newspaper or book publisher interested in publishing his account. There was a conspiracy of silence which was rarely broken until decades had passed.

Years later his son, Shmuel, painstakingly translated and published the book in order that his father's recollections and testimony not be lost. (Chana helped with the editing.) Shmuel told me that he could not translate more than a page a day because it was so painful. He knew about his father's background and knew of the existence of the diary but was never allowed to read it until then. We are very lucky that he persevered and we have an important eyewitness account to add to our shul library.

(Shmuel has a disclaimer: "Be advised that the English mistakes in the book (there are a few) were made by the publisher who retyped the book from the original which was submitted in 1987.)

Meanwhile, in Palestine...

A Tale of Love and Darkness: a memoir

By Amos Oz, translated by Nicholas De Lange

Harcourt, Inc., 2004

Born in 1939, Amos Oz grew up during WWII and the fight for Jewish independence in Palestine. He chronicles his young years in Jerusalem, the only child of an intellectual, bookish father and a romantic, mentally unstable mother who committed suicide when Oz was 12 years old. His home was filled with the comings and goings of some of the greatest writers and politicians of the day and his memories of the passage of the historic UN resolution establishing the Jewish state as seen, literally, from atop his father's shoulders, are priceless. His story continues through his adolescence until he runs away to a kibbutz at age 15. It is a painful story in some ways but full of warmth and happiness in others.

These two books, both written in detail from personal experience, provide us with two very different perspectives of youth during the same time frame. They serve as counterpoints to one another, highlighting how different Jewish lives were in separate corners of the world. Those lives would come together in Israel after 1948

but remain separate in many ways as the imprint of their childhood echoed for them for the rest of their lives.

-Laura Paley 4/19/10