

# Hunted like an animal, living like a human being

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THURSDAY, 14 MAY 2009 09:48 RABBI HILLEL GOLDBERG

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Color me skeptical.

And color me wrong.

First, I receive a Holocaust memoir — another one. They come almost once a week, it seems.

Second, a Holocaust memoir published in Denver? We are not a center of book publishing.

But, as Sam Jonas speaks to me, I keep an open mind, and I'm very glad I did.

Sam Jonas has invented a unique combination of genealogy, filial piety, historical truth and pedagogical aspiration. He's the Denverite who got the memoir published.

It started with his grandmother, who came from Zhuravne, Ukraine. Sam wanted to know about his roots, but his grandmother couldn't tell him much.

Rather than just accept that, or hunt down genealogical resources, Jonas went one step further. He traveled to Zhuravne.

And one step further.

He learned of a Holocaust memoir published in Hebrew by a ghost writer for a survivor of Zhuravne. In a unique act of selflessness, Jonas said: Look, if I can't shine a light on Zhuravne through my own family, it really doesn't make a difference. I shall not be disappointed if someone else becomes the illuminating prism.

And so, Jonas tracked down the memoir, tracked down the ghost writer, tracked down the author, located a Denver-based translator and a Denver-based publishing company, and said: We'll get the Zhuravne story out this way.

Jonas became committed to the shtetl, its Jewish community, its fate. It didn't matter to him that his own forbears would not be the central actors. The result is *The Fields of Ukraine*, the story of the survival of Yosef Laufer, then 17, as written by Haim Tal, as translated by Doron Kishoni, as published by Dalci Press, in Denver.

Jonas sees the book as especially able to communicate the Holocaust to teenagers because the book's author, and one of its two main characters, is a teenager, Yosef Laufer.

In his struggle for survival, Laufer was never far from Zhuravne. Early on, his mother was taken, and he and his father, Kalman, had to survive without her help. They did so in the fields surrounding Zhuravne and nearby villages.

The fields were unbearably cold during the winter — and that was so even when you had clothes, and when you were inside.

Yosef Laufer and his father each had only one set of clothes. They were torn, patched, threadbare, while the snows on the outside — that's all they had, the outside — reached 40 degrees below zero, for months at a time.

How did they survive this?

How did they survive without bathing for months at a time?

How did they scavenge for food when the snow was piled several feet high, and it was way below zero?

Not to mention — how did they surmount all these challenges while hiding from the Nazis and their enthusiastic collaborators?

The methods of the Laufers, and of the incredible fortitude, confidence and commitment of Yosef Laufer's father, form the panorama of this book.

If you didn't know that the author of this tale survived, you would think that each chapter is the last one. At one point, the Laufers managed to burrow into the snow-hardened earth, then to contrive a roof and keep a small fire burning 24-hours a day. Were the fire ever to go out, they had no way to re-light it.

So much for shelter. What about food?

At several points, the Laufers returned to the farms of gentiles in the vicinity of Zhuravne and begged for food. Typically, they were treated kindly and fed — for a night. Then, or shortly thereafter, the kindness melted into fear of discovery, and the Laufers were sent away, often threatened with being turned in if they reappeared.

Sometimes, they did reappear. Their lives hung by a thread. If one makeshift solution came into place, it never eliminated other life-and-death problems.

To lay down and die was an option Yosef Laufer's father never considered. And so, with each day a challenge to their very lives, they persisted, day after day, for more than two years. Kalman Laufer even marked the Sabbath. All he could do was remember, and sing Sabbath songs — while hunted like an animal.

Only two people they met in their daily death threats and escapes treated them decently with any consistency. Two righteous gentiles.

The Laufer story is told simply, plainly, utterly without artifice or dramatic effect, yet one cannot put the book down.

Their story does not end well.

Forget that it does not begin well — the Laufers see their extended family, one by one, and their friends and neighbors, one by one, taken away. The Laufers stay alive with some friends and neighbors — for a while. Then their friends are killed, or disappear, never to be heard from again.

And their mother is killed.

That's just the beginning of the story.

The middle is their survival, twice as riveting as any fictional murder mystery. This is an inspirational portrait of a father's love for his son, and of that love reciprocated. But the story does not end there and vile hatred from anti-Semites did not rise or fall along any external demarcation of war and peace.

Yosef ended up in Israel.

Alone.

Utterly alone.

He died a few months ago.

He left a family.

And a manuscript, which he jotted down immediately after the war. There is no other way the fine details — the utter immediacy — of his and his father's survival could have survived.

So this is the story of Zhuravne, in its fall.

And the story of Israel, in its rise.

Not to mention, the story Sam Jonas wanted to tell, and has told so well via his labor of love, *The Fields of Ukraine*.

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