

Monday, April 20, 2009

My Grandparents' Holocaust story

By Ralph Seliger



To my shock, my long deceased maternal grandparents (victims of the Holocaust), suddenly appeared in the pages of a book I was reading. Not only are they named in the non-fiction narrative, *The Fields of Ukraine: A 17-Year-Old's Survival of Nazi Occupation/The Story of Yosef Laufer*, the book also relates what led to their violent end (it does not describe their actual murder).

My grandparents hid together from Jew-hunting "actions" for several months in the Stryj ghetto – along with Yosef Laufer, his father, and another young man. This, in part, is how Laufer describes their existence and my grandmother's role in keeping them alive:

At night we would collect scraps of food left by those who had been rounded up. We also collected items of clothing and other useful things which we bartered for wheat or cereal. We would crush the grain by using a special kind of grater and in this way we were able to produce flour and then bake something that was edible.

Mrs. Reiss was a noble but also a very pedantic woman. She prepared food for all of us from the bits we could get hold of. She washed our clothes and tried to keep the house clean. [Maddeningly, Laufer provides no explanation for calling her "pedantic."]

Laufer recounts my grandparents being captured by Ukrainian guards while escaping the Stryj ghetto. Stryj is a town near my ancestral shtetl of Zurawno, an even smaller town in Eastern Galicia – a province of Poland between the World Wars, the southeastern edge of the Austrian Empire before that, incorporated into the Soviet Ukraine in 1939, overrun by the Nazis in 1941, returned to the Soviet Union in 1944 and now part of the independent state of Ukraine.

Yosef Laufer then spent over a year hiding with his father in the forest, begging and pilfering potatoes and whatever else they could scrounge from the fields or from obliging and not-so-obliging Polish neighbors. They survived one winter in a hole in the ground, covered by a roof of forest materials, with stores of potatoes and sugar beets. Most of their Polish neighbors shunned them, while Ukrainians hunted them. Two Poles, and one in particular, showed great kindness over an extended period of time until the Nazis permanently retreated in the summer of '44.

Laufer's story is harrowing and remarkable. It's a cliché to speak of a "triumph of the human spirit," but that is exactly what it was. He goes into detail on how his father helped sustain them spiritually, reinforcing their will to endure. Sadly, Laufer's father disappeared in March '45, on one of several business excursions in the newly liberated countryside, either succumbing to illness (he apparently suffered a heart attack the year before) or to violence – whether an antisemitic attack or simply criminal, we will never know.

Yosef Laufer went on to make aliya and to fight in the 1948 war, serving under the command of Yitzhak Rabin. He became a baker, had a family, and passed away a couple of months ago, in February. *The Fields of Ukraine* is the English version of a book written by Haim Tal in Hebrew, originally published in Israel in 1993. Appropriately, Tal wrote the book in Laufer's narrative voice.

The few survivors of Zurawno whom Laufer names after Liberation, included people I've met as *landsmen* of my parents. Laufer's story of how my grandparents met their fate jives with information my parents eventually garnered decades later. It is very possible that Yosef Laufer himself was their informant on a trip to Israel.

The emotional kicker for me is that I first noticed the name of my grandfather, Yisrael Reiss (pronounced "rice") – my grandmother's first name is not given in the text – without realizing it was him. To my shame, but also emphasizing the extent of my loss in never having known our grandparents – I've had trouble remembering their first names. But in seeing how this story so resembled what I was told about my grandparents, I stopped wondering if this was some unknown relative and looked up my mother's death certificate. Sure enough, her father's name was given as "Israel." I'd discovered my grandparents!

I wish to express my appreciation to Sam Jonas, his brother Ted, his cousin Bob Boehm, my sister Joan Sidney and everyone else involved in making this book come to life in English. Beyond my personal sense of connection, this is a genuine contribution to our understanding of the Holocaust. It can be ordered through **Dallci Press**.

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