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## INTRODUCTION

BY SIR MARTIN GILBERT C.B.E., D.LITT

It is a great honour to be asked to write this introduction. When I met Michel Mielnicki in Vancouver, I could feel the strength of his character, and something of the pain of his suffering. Since 1945 he has been a Holocaust witness, which, as he recounts, “has been its own kind of hell.”

Michel was born in a small town, Wasilkow, in eastern Poland, a few miles from the city of Bialystok. Of the town’s 5,000 inhabitants, 1,500 were Jews. After the German conquest of that region in the summer of 1941, he spent fourteen months in the ghetto of Pruzany. From there he was deported with his family to Auschwitz, where his father was murdered. Later he was a slave labourer, first at Buna, then at Mittelbau-Dora. He was liberated in Belsen.

Even from this brief outline of Michel’s story it is clear that he has much to tell. The details in the book are rich and rewarding. He describes his childhood in Wasilkow with particular charm — the lost world of pre-War Polish Jewry. Even during the War, his memories of the earlier years were to haunt, and to serve him: “Sauerkraut, warmed in a little oil, then mixed with mashed potatoes, was something I fantasized about as a half-starved inmate in Birkenau, or as I lay at death’s door too weak from hunger even to move from my bunk when the British army liberated Bergen-Belsen in 1945.” It was memories of his mother’s cooking, he attests, that gave him, while in Birkenau, “the saliva necessary to chew bread that was at least twenty-five percent sawdust.”

Childhood, with recollections of dodging from time to time the Polish anti-Semites while on the way to school, was followed by the German invasion of Poland, when Michel was twelve. He vividly recalls how his father took him into Bialystok to see the bodies of some of the several hundred Jews who had been murdered there in the few days before the German army was replaced by the Soviet forces. "I don't know whether my father saw our future clearly then or not, but in his own very particular way, he was preparing me to survive it by making me, at least in part, immune to some of its horrors."

The period of Soviet rule, from September 1939 to June 1941, saw Michel's father working for the Soviet secret service. "It is my firm belief that no one was ever murdered at my father's behest," Michel asserts. But so hated did his father become that "because I was Chaim Mielnicki's son, I found myself the target of Polish bullets when I returned to Bialystok after the War."

Soviet rule brought unexpected benefits. This part of Michel's memoirs, which includes his bar mitzvah, throws light on a neglected period of Jewish history. Among other things, the pre-War Polish quota system for Jews in higher education was swept away. He himself, aged fourteen, took up photography, and, by taking photographs of Russian soldiers that they would then send to their parents and sweethearts, earned enough money to buy a motorcycle.

The German occupation began in June 1941. With his blond hair masking his Jewishness, Michel joined a bread queue. A Polish Christian classmate volunteered to help the Nazi guard point out Jews in the lineup, and Michel was forced to leave it.

The torments of the Holocaust did not destroy Michel's sense of right and wrong. For me, the two most powerful sentences in his book are his statement: "When I was liberated from Bergen-Belsen in 1945, I could not bring myself to join my colleagues in capturing and killing our former SS guards. I turned away when they were being beaten to death, saying that this was a matter for God, or for the law courts."

It was the Poles, not Germans, who caused the first mass murder of Jews in Wasilkow. Michel does honour to those first victims by naming them (the naming of names is so important in the Jewish recognition of the merit and value of each individual). Thus he identifies “the orchestra leader, Avreml Polak, his brother-in-law, Dovid Shrabinski, the crate-maker’s son, Motke Spektor, Archik the Greek, and a fine artist by the name of Shie Mongele,” dragged from their beds and clubbed to death in the yard of a textile factory. “How do I know this? I saw their bodies.” Not only that, as one of those who were forced to bury the bodies, Michel was present when the two German soldiers brutally assaulted and then burned to death the community’s much-respected *shochet* (ritual slaughterman), Walper Kowalski. “I was haunted by the smell of burning flesh. Of course, I did not yet know that I was going to a crematorium where I would smell it all the time, day and night.”

With Wasilkow under German rule, Michel witnessed yet another terrifying pogrom carried out by local Poles. He saw from his window “one of our very pregnant neighbours being beaten to death with clubs and two-by-fours,” and heard a Pole call out to his fellow-looters as they rampaged through the house next door: “Don’t damage, don’t damage, it’s all ours.” By the time German soldiers intervened to stop this Polish slaughter of Jews, two dozen more had been murdered.

From Wasilkow, the Mielnickis went to Bialystok. Michel’s descriptions of the Bialystok ghetto are haunting. He tells of the newborn babies “whose little lives had been snuffed out by mothers unable to feed them”. From Bialystok, to avoid Chaim Mielnicki’s arrest on Gestapo orders, the family went to Pruzany, another ghetto, and another stage of the harrowing saga. There, during the next fourteen months, hunger and privation took its steady, relentless toll. “By the time we left Pruzany in December 1942, we all looked like ragamuffins — which served further to destroy our self-esteem, and thus

weaken by another degree or two our ability to resist the Nazi death machine.”

In December 1942 came the order for transfer to “work” in Germany for 3,000 of the ghetto inmates. “We were optimistic about our futures. Even Mother, who was by this time emaciated, thought we might be better off in a labour camp.” She told her family: “At least we’ll have our daily bread, and soup, and things like that. They’re not going to let us starve in a labour camp.” But this “labour camp” destination was a cruel Nazi deception. Michel had never travelled by train before. His description of the agonies of the journey constitutes one of the more powerful pages in the book: his own torment and that of those around him. “I was so far out of it that I didn’t even know that only an arm’s length away my mother was dying.”

At the selection at the railway ramp at Auschwitz, Michel’s father was seized by the neck by a cane-wielding non-commissioned officer in charge of the selection that day, immaculately dressed SS-Sergeant Kuhnemann. “On the side, you dirty Jew,” Kuhnemann screamed at Michel’s father, “and began to smash him across the head.” Chaim Mielnicki was forty-seven years old. “I have never recovered from his loss,” Michel avers. “Nor have I ever been able to reconcile myself to the obscene and mocking death inflicted upon him by the forces of Hitlerian maleficence.” Michel’s mother also died that day, possibly on a stretcher on the ramp.

Michel, his brother Aleksei, and their sister Lenka, were selected for slave labour. Michel’s description of Birkenau is true and horrific. “My God, I once saw a prisoner sent to the crematorium for having boils on his neck.” He witnessed two fellow-prisoners pushed upside down through the toilet seat until their heads were under the excrement, and then held down with long poles “until the bubbles stopped coming through.” Other prisoners were then ordered to take out the bodies, hose them down, and lay them out at roll call.

At the slave labour camp at Buna, a few miles from Auschwitz, a British prisoner of war said to Michel: “You’re going to die, you

goddamned Jew.” As I write these words, I can only hang my head in shame at a fellow-Briton’s ugliness. I might note, however, that another prisoner of war at Buna, British Sergeant John Coward, was given the Righteous Gentile award by the State of Israel for saving Jews.

After Buna, which he describes with stark honesty — the hallmark of his book — Michel survived a death march, and also the Mittelbau-Dora slave labour camp, at which he was one of tens of thousands of slave labourers making Hitler’s V1 and V2 “revenge weapons” (flying bombs and rockets). It was a camp in which more slave labourers died — 20,000 in all — than Britons and Belgians blown up when the weapons landed.

Michel’s war ended in Belsen. He has serious criticisms of the efforts of his British liberators in saving lives, though the efforts of the British doctors and nurses have been praised by others. Michel’s conclusion with regard to the British effort is unequivocal: “We deserved better”. And he was there.

After escaping from a death march, Michel’s sister Lenka had been saved in hiding by a Sudeten-German woman for more than four months, until liberation. The woman’s son was a German army officer. Michel and Lenka were reunited because both had written to an uncle in New Jersey to say that they were alive. The uncle had been able to put them in touch with each other. Such were the small miracles of those years.

Michel travelled to Bialystok. He was advised not to go on to his home town, Wasilkow. A newly wed Jewish couple who had done so, hoping to regain their family home, had been murdered — beheaded by local Poles. But return he did, and had the amazing good fortune of being given \$500 (a considerable sum in those days) for his two family properties: a second small miracle. More than a thousand Jews had been murdered after they had gone back to their home towns in Poland in 1945. Michel himself was shot at, one night, in Bialystok. Both bullets missed. Then, on the train westward, a Polish thug pointed a machine gun at him. “Are you

a Jew?" he demanded. Michel sneered in reply: "What? Are you trying to insult me?" and was left alone. That incident decided him to leave Poland for ever. He went to France with his sister. In Paris he met his future wife, June, herself a survivor, originally from Cracow. In 1953 they emigrated to Canada. Lenka stayed in France, and later emigrated to Israel.

In 1989, the notorious SS-Sergeant Kuhnemann, from Birkenau, was recognized by another Auschwitz inmate, Rudy Vrba, singing on stage during the performance of an opera in Duisburg, Germany. Michel went to Germany to give evidence against him. Ironically, both Vrba and Michel were then (and now) living in Vancouver. Michel comments: "Kuhnemann is now in his late seventies, or early eighties, too old, under German law, to be sent to jail. This *SS-criminal* will die at home, surrounded by his loving family. I don't want revenge, but I would like a little justice after all these years."

Kuhnemann's trial had one extraordinary sequel. Michel mentioned his brother Aleksei to the German prosecutor. Visiting Auschwitz some months later, the prosecutor found that Aleksei had been there earlier to register for compensation. He was alive, a Soviet citizen living in Ivano-Frankovsk (formerly the Polish city of Stanislawow). Michel had given up his brother for dead. In fact he had survived Mauthausen, been arrested after liberation by the Russians, near Warsaw, and been conscripted into the Soviet Army. In 1992 Michel visited Aleksei. They had not met for fifty years, since Birkenau.

In these pages, as one follows Michel from place to place, from Wasilkow to Bialystok, from Bialystok to Pruzany, from Pruzany to Birkenau, and then on to Buna, Mittelbau-Dora and Belsen, one is in the presence of great evil, and great courage. This is a story, not only of survival, but of the lives, qualities, enthusiasm and Jewish hearts that were destroyed in the twentieth century: the century which brought science, medicine and communications forward as never before, yet also saw the backward march of

mankind. One can only pray that the twenty-first century will be spared such horrors. Reading this book will help show the generations now coming to adulthood just how necessary it is to be eternally vigilant.

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