

The Fields of Ukraine: A 17-Year-Old's Survival of Nazi Occupation

Haim Tal

Dallaci Press (February 2009)

Softcover \$15.95 (168pp)

978-0-9822304-0-4

Recording the experiences of Holocaust survivors remains a crucial project, partly because many people and even some entire villages live only in the memories of one or two people. Some survivors, reticent about sharing their experiences, need only a little sympathetic prompting to realize that their personal history honors the dead and teaches important lessons to the living.

Yosef Laufer was one such survivor. A chance encounter in Israel with Haim Tal, another survivor, prompted him to retrieve a yellowing Yiddish manuscript and share it with Tal, his family, and even his granddaughter's class at school; it eventually became this book. Author Tal drew on Laufer's manuscript and preserved his narrative voice.

Laufer's hometown, Zurawno, fell under Nazi control when the Germans chased the Soviets out of the Ukraine in 1941, unleashing a flood of native anti-Semitism that quickly impoverished the town's Jews. When Laufer and his parents were herded onto a train bound for a concentration camp, he and other captives used rocks to cut the barbed wire blocking the car's small window. As the train began to move, he pushed the window open and jumped. Much to his surprise, his father also jumped, and the two men began their three-year sojourn in the woods, fields, and barns of Zurawno and the surrounding towns. They never saw Laufer's mother again.

Hunger and cold drove the Laufers to approach farmers they knew, but most provided only minimal aid: a loaf of bread or permission to shelter in a barn for one night. Laufer remembers one farmer, Melnik, who offered cigarettes, and Lushchewski, who used a drop point to provide staples such as matches and salt. However, the Laufers subsisted chiefly by stealing from prosperous farms: potatoes, onions, garlic, and even raw wheat from the fields through which they crawled. They carved an underground dugout that allowed them to keep a fire burning undetected through the deadly Ukrainian winter.

Laufer's father guided his son through these hard years, keeping him focused on "more useful things" than worrying about capture or mourning the dead: "Our renewed decision to carry on as long as there was a breath of life in us was the secret weapon that kept us alive." After the war, the Laufers returned to Zurawno and tried to eke an honest living there, despite constant reminders of their losses and ongoing violence against Jews. After his father disappeared, Laufer was unable to locate his body or learn the manner of his death.

In 1948, Laufer was on "the first boat to enter Haifa openly." He enlisted immediately and fought for Israel's independence with the *Harel* brigade: "The boy who hunted in the fields of Ukraine now carried arms in self-defense and was fighting for the independence of his own country."

This tale of ingenuity, endurance, and the human spirit makes an important contribution to Holocaust literature. Its sparse, straightforward language tells a compelling story and will appeal to both adult and teen readers. Sixteen photographs reinforce the fragmentary nature of Holocaust documentation. Initially published in Hebrew in 1993, this book's translation into English by Yitzchak Enav is a valuable addition to existing Holocaust literature.

ELIZABETH BREAU (November 1, 2010)

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