

## Surviving in Silence: A Deaf Boy in the Holocaust: The Harry I. Dunai Story

A REVIEW BY BARRY H. BERGEN

**Eleanor C. Dunai, *Surviving in Silence: A Deaf Boy in the Holocaust: The Harry I. Dunai Story*. Forward by John S. Schuchman (Washington: Gallaudet University Press, 2002). xvii + 184 pages. \$29.95.**

*Surviving in Silence* is one of the few published memoirs of a Deaf Jewish Holocaust survivor, and perhaps the first by a major press in any language. As such, it makes a significant contribution to Deaf History and Holocaust History. Even the youngest of the survivors of the terrible events of Europe's mid-century are now approaching the last stage of their lives. It is therefore of crucial importance that the neglected stories of Deaf people in the Holocaust be documented, a project now being undertaken by Donna Ryan and John Schuchman of Gallaudet University. Schuchman provides the introduction for *Surviving in Silence*, and in fairness to the readers of this review I should say at the outset that not only are Ryan and Schuchman my colleagues, but I also know Harry Dunai himself. I first met him at the conference on the Deaf experience in the Holocaust sponsored by Gallaudet and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1998. I subsequently participated in a three-week tour of Holocaust sites in 2000, with Dunai, other survivors, and a group of faculty and students, during which we visited many of the sites mentioned in this memoir. Nevertheless, the importance of this memoir cannot be contested.

*Surviving in Silence* was written by Dunai's

daughter Eleanor from the perspective of Harry himself. Beginning with his birth as Izrael Deutsch in 1934, the ninth of ten children in a hearing Jewish family on their farm in what was then Czechoslovakia (given to Hungary by the Nazis, it later became part of Russia, and is today part of the Ukraine), Harry's memoir extends well beyond the Holocaust to his settling in California in 1963. In between, Harry lived through many of the major events in twentieth-century Europe. For Deaf History, the most important parts of his story concern his early life. Harry's family owned a farm and small general store in the tiny town then called Velky Komjata, in the Ruthenian area of the Carpathian Mountains in extreme eastern Czechoslovakia. It was a happy but simple life of hard work: they had no indoor plumbing; they worked the fields and slaughtered their own animals. They were a religious family, and Harry's father had studied to be a rabbinical judge, though he did not function as one. The area in which they lived was a complex mix of ethnic and linguistic groups, including Slovaks, Romanians, Ruthenians, and Hungarians, and Harry's family spoke Magyar, the Hungarian language. After Harry was deafened at about age one, the family devised a rudimentary system of home signs and gestures to communicate with him. But rather than send him to the government-run school for the Deaf about sixty miles away, which the other deaf boy in the town attended, at age six Harry was sent to the privately-funded Israelite [Jewish] Deaf and Mute National Institute, a boarding

school in Budapest, Hungary, about 350 miles away. Along with the three other Jewish boarding schools for the Deaf in Berlin, London and Vienna, it was one of the great private schools for the Jewish Deaf in Europe founded in the nineteenth century. I believe that the choice of the Israelite Institute, with its excellent reputation, reflects the importance of Jewish identity for the family, as well as their concern for getting him the best possible education.

We discover many details of life in the residential school, and readers no doubt will find much that is familiar in these recollections of a small deaf boy far from his family. His education was first and foremost oral, and all the teachers were hearing. Dunai recounts the long slow lessons to teach him first to produce sounds and read lips, then reading and writing. But he also writes about sign language (allowed only outside of the classroom), play time, and holiday celebrations. As the Nazi-influenced government imposed economic restrictions on his family, Harry also gradually became aware of the differences between paying students and charity students: separate food rations, separate sleeping quarters, and so on.

Harry was only ten years old in 1944 when the Nazis seized direct control of Hungary and attempted to complete the annihilation of its Jews. Forced into the ghetto, Harry narrowly avoided deportation, bombs, and starvation. By the end of the war, his parents and two siblings had perished, as did many friends and schoolmates, and the rest of his family was scattered. Harry survived through luck, perseverance, ingenuity, and determination: he remained in Budapest, witnessing the Soviet battle for the city and the subsequent transformation of Hungary into a Soviet satellite. His story continues with his own success

as a Budapest machinist, the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and his emigration first to Sweden, and then the United States.

Harry Dunai's story, then, lies at the intersection of grand historical developments, shifting borders, and complex politics. Given his youth at the time, and that his recollections were not made until the late 1990s, some of Dunai's memoir is unavoidably colored by his knowledge of later history. But Harry seems very clear about the evolution of his own beliefs. As a boy and then a young man, he struggled to understand not only shifting political ideologies, but also the role of religion in the face of the horrors he experienced.

Eleanor and Harry Dunai have done a reasonably good job of inserting some social and historical context into his story. In some cases, this information is a bit off the point: the German program for sterilizing or killing the mentally ill and physically handicapped, including the deaf, applied to Germans only. Generally, however, the background they provide is helpful.

Unfortunately, the book is slightly marred by clumsy writing or translations, and even a few grammatical errors, which should have been cleaned up in editing. However, the overall impact of this memoir does not depend on such details. It has been said that the story of any Jew who survived the Holocaust is by definition not typical. But Harry Dunai's story is a truly remarkable tale of perseverance, survival and success. Moving as well as informative, it is particularly welcome for its glimpse into the life of the Jewish Deaf in Central Europe during the terrible upheavals of the mid-twentieth century.

— *Barry H. Bergen is Associate Professor of European History at Gallaudet University.*