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'Schindler's List' Holocaust survivor tells his story

Joseph Bau married Rebecca Tannenbaum in Nazi concentration camp

Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry? By Joseph Bau (Arcade Publishing Inc., 228 pgs. First English-language edition summer, 1998).

Review by MARTIN ZELIG

There's a scene in *Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry?* that reminds one of the balcony scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

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But it has even greater poignancy and meaning than in the Bard's play. An artist, an author, and Israel's first animator, Joseph Bau, who lives in Tel Aviv, grew up in Krakow, Poland. He was a prisoner in the Nazi's Plaszow concentration camp in Poland, and later, was one of the Jews rescued by Oskar Schindler during the Second World War. Exhibitions of Bau's work have appeared in Israel, the United States, and Canada. He was nominated for the prestigious Israel Prize in 1998.

Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry?, which was originally published in Hebrew and Polish, has been superbly rendered into English by part-time Winnipeg resident Shlomo "Sam" Yurman. With style and even humor, this first-person memoir captures the emotions and many of the daily details of life during the Holocaust, and its deep-seated effect on the author afterwards.

The title of the book, actually the last line of a poem by Bau, refers to the all-consuming "great hunger" which afflicted the vast majority of ghetto residents



JOSEPH BAU: Part-time Winnipegger Sam Yurman has translated his memoirs into English.

and concentration camp prisoners.

A number of Joseph Bau's graphic art works and poetry, all of which recall aspects of his life during the war, are included in the book. A reproduction of his mother Tzilah Bau's identity card (Kenkarte) can also be found on the inside front cover.

One day in the fall of 1943, Bau, who was luckily able to work as a draftsman for the Nazis, was standing outside, trying to make some sun prints.

"I was very tense. I never desired the sun more than on that day, for I would be at a loss to find a way to explain my failure to the Nazi supervisor, a known expert in murder," he writes.

At that fateful moment, a pretty girl, "whose striped uniform didn't diminish her attractiveness," came out of the office and asked "What are you trying to do?" Bau replied, "I'm waiting for the reluctant sun to come out.

Could you, perhaps, take its place? Her reply was to flee in embarrassment.

That was Bau's first meeting with his future wife, the sweet-faced Rebecca Tannenbaum, "my life's sunshine".

Romeo also compared his fair Juliet to the "sun".

Joseph and Rebecca were married in great secrecy, due very largely to Joseph's cunning and bravery, in the women's barracks at Plaszow on February 14, 1944. The scene was briefly dramatized in the Steven Spielberg movie, *Schindler's List*. (Thomas

Kencally's prize-winning 1982 book of the same name gives more prominence to Joseph and Rebecca than does the movie.)

Rebecca Bau died on April 28, 1997. When Joseph and Rebecca, to whom the book is dedicated, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in 1994, many in the press and on television represented them as "the most romantic couple" on Earth. We learn of Rebecca's great moral and physical courage. For example, she was the one who found a place for her husband on Schindler's list.

According to the book's only footnote: "Many years later, after the release of the film *Schindler's List*, she told a journalist that she had had faith in her own survival, but she feared for her husband: "My husband was more important to me than I was, and I wasn't afraid." That was the first time Joseph Bau learned how he came to be spared the ordeal of the Gross-Rosen concentration camp."

Rebecca Bau was sent to Auschwitz, where, we learn, she was marked three times for the gas chamber, but talked her way out of cer-

tain death.

In February, 1971, Joseph and his wife received invitations from the Austrian government to testify in the trial of the SS man Gruen, "who was accused of murdering thousands of concentration camp prisoners, after subjecting them to the vilest tortures." Bau's own father, Abraham, "of blessed memory, was one of his victims."

Earlier in the book, Bau recalls the horror of actually having witnessed his father's murder by that notorious Nazi.

After the trial, Joseph took ill and was hospitalized for a month in a Viennese hospital. Bau relates that the other patients in his room had all been SS men in the concentration camps or other prison compounds. "They spoke nostalgically about those 'glorious good old days,'" he discloses. "They praised the great Fuhrer, and expressed the belief that all was not lost, their truth would be restored to rule the world, and then...."

Those unrepentant old Nazis didn't know Rebecca

Bau was fluent in German. After telling them who she and Joseph were, they tried to obscure their experiences and explain their conduct as just carrying out orders. "But," as Bau says, "nothing could disguise their polluted minds; no perfume could hide the smell of rot in their souls."

Besides his beloved Rebecca, Joseph Bau, who is now in his late 70s, has also dedicated his book to the memory of his mother, Tzilah Bau, murdered in Bergen-Belsen in 1945; his father, Abraham Bau, murdered in the Plaszow concentration camp in 1943; his brother Izi (Ignacy) Bau, murdered in the Krakow ghetto in 1943; the six million Jews who perished with them; and Oskar Schindler, "without whom this book would never have been written, who died in Frankfurt in 1974."

Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry? is an important, compelling and highly readable contribution to the literature of the Holocaust.

The writer is a Jewish Winnipeg freelancer.