WHERE WERE YOU 70 YEARS AGO?

Address by Nathan Lewin

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Seventy years. Three score and ten. That's a full lifetime. King David – author of Tehillim, the Psalms -- recites (90:10): "Ye-mei She-no-sei-nu Bo-hem Shiv-im Sha-na" – "The days of our years are seventy years." And King David lived to 70. Where were you 70 years ago?

Where was I on May 1, 1941 – or on Nissan 27, which was April 24 of that year – 70 years ago?

I was a 5-year-old who had reached the United States after traveling across half the world to flee from Nazi brutality. My father and I had recently arrived in America by boat from Kobe, Japan. In a letter written on June 20, 1941, that I hold in my hand, my father wrote in German – their common language -- to my mother, who had stayed in Japan with her mother and younger brother, as they were trying to get visas to the United States for her family. The letter is from Washington, written on the stationery of The Bellevue Hotel at 15 E Street NW, telephone number Metropolitan 0900. He described me as already speaking "paar worte English" – several words of English. He reports that when I am asked how` many languages I know, I reply, with a toddler's arrogance, "I am 5 years old and I speak 6 languages" (counting them on my fingers), "German, Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Dutch and English." And I add, "I've already forgotten Dutch."

He adds in his letter, that when asked where my mommy is, I reply, "In Japan, but she is coming soon and bringing the toys that I left there." He concludes that I am a thorough "Amerikanischer Patriot" – American Patriot – who declares that under no circumstances will I return to Japan. I returned 60 years later to Osaka and then to Kobe to honor the memory of

Japanese Consul Chiune Sugihara, whose brave issuance of visas saved thousands of Jewish lives.

Learning English was not so easy. My father sent me to a kosher summer camp two months after we arrived. When the kids saw how I was struggling with this new sixth language, they asked, "Where are you from?" I took the question literally, and, having come from Kobe, I replied, "Japan." Parents of American Jewish boys sent to Camp Machanaim in the summer of 1941 were astounded to learn from letters sent home that there was a Japanese boy in the bunk.

Where was my father 70 years ago?

He had been a rising star in the Polish Jewish world. Son of the famed Rabbi of Rzeszow ("Raishe" in Yiddish), and devout in religious observance, he was a master of Polish, German, and Yiddish, and holder of a doctorate in law from the University of Lvov. In his native Poland, he wrote articles on current issues in popular periodicals and contributed historical studies to scholarly journals. After he married my mother, whose father was an Amsterdam resident and owner of textile mills in Lodz, my parents settled in Lodz, Poland's second largest city, where I was born.

Hitler's feared invasion of Poland in September 1939 tore my father from his surroundings and from the life that he was destined for as a leader of Polish Jewry. My mother, who had been raised in Amsterdam and perceived the Nazi threat clearly, prevailed on him to pick up the family and escape to the East. In the dead of night my father carried me in his arms through a forest that separated Poland from Lithuania, following directions from a band that smuggled fleeing Jews across the Polish border. I have suppressed those memories, but I was told by my parents that they warned their 3-year-old as we entered the dark woods that there were wolves in the forest that would eat me if I made a sound. I found this a persuasive reason for keeping absolutely silent, and we emerged safely in what was then an independent Lithuania. We made our way to Vilna, where there were already thousands of Jewish refugees.

At the age of 30, my father had been elected to the Lodz City Council, which convened for only 3 months in 1937, before it was dissolved in acrimony in March of that year. On January 27, 1937, a 23-year-old Jewish man was attacked and killed on a Lodz street. On the following day in the City Council my father protested "the murder of an innocent Jew" and declared, "We

will not permit Jews to be killed on the streets of this town." The official transcript reports the following interruptions:

(1) Councilman Czernik (National Camp):"It is necessary to kill all the Jews. Your days are numbered."
(2) Councilman Kowalski (also known then as the "Polish Hitler"): "We have to evict the Jews from their dwellings and give the apartments to the Poles."
(3) Councilman Maluch (National Camp): "To Palestine, you choleric."
(4) Councilman Czernik: "Jews, your days are numbered in Poland."
(5) And then a voice that the transcript does not identify: "Jew, don't speak any more, because if you do not stop, we will throw you down from the rostrum."

At this point, the official transcript reports that the President of the` Council rang his bell constantly until order was finally restored in the hall.

My father was re-elected to the Lodz City Council when it was re-established in 1938, and he continued to battle the vicious anti-Semites until Hitler's invasion of Poland. Much more can and should be said about my father, who wasted no time once we arrived in America. On August 21, 1941, a few months after his arrival, he cried out, at the annual convention of Agudath Israel in Baltimore, that European Jewry was living under the rule of evil, subject to the greatest enemy in Jewish history, who "drinks their blood like a wild beast." He reported that Jews in Europe were beaten mercilessly each day, that their life is not a life, and that they cry out for help and are not answered. Hundreds of thousands, he said, are imprisoned in ghettoes, with no permission for them to leave or for anyone to enter to provide them with the bare necessities of life. And many, he said, have been slaughtered, leaving countless widows and orphans.

He kept crying out in the months and years that followed, with Yiddish articles in the *Morgen Journal* – a Yiddish daily newspaper – and in the *Poilisher Yid* and the *Yiddishe Shtime*. On February 6, 1942, the *Morgen Journal* carried his article titled, "Will We Allow the Jews in the Polish Ghettoes To Be Annihilated?" He warned prophetically that "all that will be left of our brothers and sisters will be graves – and maybe not even that much." He ended: "Nisht Varten! Nisht Shveigen!" – "Do Not Wait! Do Not Remain Silent!"

Not until more than half a year later, in late August 1942, did much of American Jewry begin to hear the horrible news coming from Europe. Dr. Stephen Wise, Jewish confidant of the White House, proudly reported to President Roosevelt in December 1942 that he had kept information regarding the extermination of Europe's Jews "out of the press."

Another word about my father. In January 1943 B'nai B'rith held a national conference in Pittsburgh to which 34 national Jewish organizations were invited. The subject was to be "the post-war status of Jews and the upbuilding of a Jewish Palestine." Although he was still struggling to learn the English language, my father asked to address the meeting. None of the first 23 speakers at the Pittsburgh conference mentioned rescuing the Jews of Europe or alleviating their plight. When the refugee from Poland spoke in heavily accented English, he reminded the delegates that it was meaningless to deliberate on the "post-war status of Jewry" without first ensuring that there would be "Jews left in Europe after the war . . . who will be able to help build the Land of Israel."

Where was my mother 70 years ago?

She was in Kobe, Japan, seeking refuge for her mother and younger brother Levi before she would come to America on the non-immigrant US visa that had been issued to my father and his immediate family. There is an official roster of the 2139 visas issued by Chiune Sugihara, the saintly Japanese Consul in Kovno who, in July and August 1940, tirelessly hand-wrote endorsements in Japanese on the travel documents of Polish, Lithuanian, and German Jews. Numbers 16, 17, and 18 on that list are the Sugihara transit visas to Rachel Sternheim, Isak Lewin, and Levi Sternheim. Rachel Sternheim and Levi Sternheim were my maternal grandmother and my uncle. The visa issued to Isak Lewin was for my parents and myself.

My mother opened this escape route. She had corresponded with the Dutch Ambassador in Riga asking whether she – a Dutch citizen before she married my father – could travel to Dutch colonies without a visa. He replied that, as the wife of a Polish national, she was no longer eligible to enter the Dutch East Indies without obtaining a visa (and none was being issued), but entry to the Dutch West Indies was possible if, on arrival, the governor of Surinam and Curacao approved.

So my mother asked the Dutch consul in Kovno, a businessman named Jan Zwartendijk, to please copy part of the Dutch Ambassador's reply on our family's travel document. It was, by that date, a Lithuanian "Leidimas" because Poland no longer existed as an independent country and a Polish passport was a worthless piece of paper. Zwartendijk agreed, and with that endorsement, my mother and my uncle Levi proceeded to the Japanese consulate seeking permission for our family to transit Japan on a theoretical trip to Curacao. Consul Sugihara issued the visas they sought. In the following weeks, throngs of Jews from Vilna and Kovno lined up at the Japanese consulate seeking similar documentation. Mr. Sugihara wrote out the Japanese characters that saved their lives. He disobeyed instructions sent from the Japanese Foreign Ministry ordering him to stop, and this act of insubordination effectively ended his career as a Japanese diplomat.

Lithuania had, by then, been absorbed into the Soviet Union, and my parents, my maternal grandmother, my uncle Levi and I were permitted to go from Vilna to Moscow, then by a 14-day trip on the trans-Siberian railroad to Vladivostok, and then to leave the Soviet paradise and travel to Japan. We were there just a few months before my father and I traveled by boat to San Francisco in March 1941.

My mother rejoined my father and me in New York in July 1941 before her American visa expired, leaving her mother and brother in Japan because they could not come to America. They had arranged passage, as Dutch citizens, to Sumatra.

One renowned Polish refugee who used the Sugihara escape route from Vilna to Kobe and then to Palestine was a future member of Israel's cabinet, Zorach Warhaftig. Upon learning from my parents that the Curacao transit visa was available, he traveled to Kovno and received his visa four days after my mother's. He is Number 455 on the Foreign Ministry's list. Warhaftig reported in his autobiography that many years after the war he met the Dutch official who had been the governor of Surinam and Curacao in 1940 and 1941. Warhaftig asked whether the governor would have admitted a boatload of Jews had they arrived in the Dutch West Indies with the Zwartendijk endorsement on their travel documents. "No way," said the former governor, "I would have forced the ship back out to the sea."

Where were my grandfathers 70 years ago?

My paternal grandfather was Rabbi Aaron Lewin, a brilliant Torah scholar, rabbi first of Sambor and then of Rzeszow -- Jewish communities in Galicia. He was elected twice to the Polish legislature, the Sejm, in 1922 and in 1930, where he surprised everyone with his oratory in the Polish language. On the long train rides from Rzeszow to Warsaw each week to attend sessions of the Sejm he wrote commentaries on the Torah that had been published in four volumes by the summer of 1939. The manuscript that he had completed by September of that year would have covered another three volumes.

When Hitler's army invaded Poland, the Raisher Rav knew he would be high on the Nazis' wanted list. He and my paternal grandmother fled westward and tried unsuccessfully to cross the border to Romania and, when that did not succeed, to Lithuania. He was arrested twice by Russian police but was ultimately released.

In April 1940 he reached Lvov (known to Jews as "Lemberg"), where he stayed with his daughter, my father's older sister Priva, and her husband, a respected physician. A younger brother, Yechezkel Lewin, was a well-known and well-connected rabbi in Lemberg. As of May 1, 1941, my grandfather was living at 11 Jagielonska Street in Lvov, an address that I visited in 1989.

Little did he know that two months later, on July 1, 1941, he and his brother would be murdered in a pogrom that the local Ukrainians perpetrated on the Jews of Lvov as the Russian troops left the city and the German army entered it. In his classic work "The Holocaust," Martin Gilbert describes how Rabbi Yechezkel Lewin was returning home from a meeting at which he pleaded with the Ukrainian Catholic Church's prelate Sheptitsky to calm the "wild crowds" rioting against the Jews.

"At the threshold of his house he was seized by Ukrainian militiamen, and dragged to prison. There, still in his rabbinical robes, he was pushed and beaten with the rifle butts of German soldiers, before being shot down in the prison courtyard. Several thousand Jews were murdered in these prison killings, among them Lewin's brother, Rabbi Aaron Lewin, a former deputy in the Polish parliament, and head of the rabbinical court of the city of Rzeszow." (Martin Gilbert, The Holocaust, p. 164 (1985).) My grandfather was then 61 years old.

My maternal grandfather, Naftali Sternheim, a daring businessman, had returned to Amsterdam when the war began on a commercial flight from Poland. He was planning to rejoin the family with money and diamonds he had in Amsterdam. When that became impossible, he stayed in touch by mail. I have a letter he wrote to his family 70 years ago, on May 25, 1941. Family members who were living in Amsterdam have told me they watched as he sewed diamonds into the lining of his coat and boarded a train for the Swiss border. He was to leave the train at a point where smugglers led Jews into Switzerland. But he was caught by the Swiss police. They turned him over to the German authorities, who included him in a transport to Auschwitz.

What happened to my grandmothers?

The widow of the Raisher Rav, Rebbetzin Doba Lewin (nee Friedman), hid with her daughter Priva in a "bunker" in Lvov after my grandfather was murdered. In August 1942, their hiding place was reported to the Germans. Both were arrested and transported to the death camp at Belzec. Priva's daughter, then 11 years old, was shot and killed.

Rachel Sternheim, my maternal grandmother, a Dutch citizen, traveled from Japan to the Dutch East Indies with her son Levi. He enlisted in the Dutch military, fought the Japanese, and died in battle on May 20, 1943. He is buried on the Isle of Flores.

Rachel Sternheim is the only grandparent I remember. She was interned by the Japanese in a civilian camp in Singapore and came finally to spend the last years of her life in New York with us. She spoiled her only grandchild.

And now, after 70 years in the United States of America, this bountiful haven to which my parents, *zichronom livracha*, brought me and where, with the help of G-d, I was given opportunities beyond their wildest expectations, I, too, am a grandfather. My oldest grandchild celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in Washington two years ago. His Hebrew birthdate is the 16th day of the month of Tammuz. In tav-shin (5700) -- the year we made our journey, with the Sugihara visa, from Vilna across Russia to Japan – the 16th of Tammuz was July 22, 1940. That was the date on which Jan Zwartendijk, the Dutch Consul in Kovno, endorsed Izaak and Pessla Lewin's Lithuanian "Leidimas" with the seemingly pedestrian official observation that no visa is required to enter Surinam and Curacao, thereby initiating our flight to freedom.

I see it as a Heavenly sign that this rescue was made possible by a man whose name was Chiune Sugihara. I do not know the correct Japanese pronunciation of that name, but reading it with Hebrew vocalization, "Chiune" means "life-giving." Rabbi Judah Halevi, a master of Hebrew usage, speaks in his Kuzari of "hakoach ha-chiyuni" – the life-giving force. And Sugihara carries within it the Hebrew word "hara" – pregnant. Our matriarch Sarah was told, "Hinach hara ve-yaledet ben" – "You are pregnant and will give birth to a son." His name is suitable for the hero who offered life and fruitfulness to thousands who were facing death and annihilation.

The verse in Tehillim that speaks of the 70-year life-span goes on to declare "Ve-im Be-ge-vu-ros She-mo-nim Sha-na" – "And with strength we reach eighty years." Our people continue to be besieged by foes determined to destroy us. The next decade -- getting from 70 to 80 -- will require strength and, as the verse in Psalms continues, "amal va-aven" – "toil and pain." But the Heavenly will is "Am Yisrael Chai" – the Jewish People live.

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