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The Untold Story of the Jews Brave Acts

David E. Fishman, author of the award winning novel “The Book Smugglers,” spoke at the Holocaust Museum about the brave acts of Jewish activists, mostly consisting of poets and literary enthusiasts in pursuit of saving the Jewish culture from the hands of Nazi Germany by smuggling books in the former Vilnius ghetto in Lithuania during World War II.

According to University Press of New England, Fishman is a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, where he teaches Jewish History. The idea for writing this novel began 25 years ago when he was invited to consult items discovered in the former church in Vilnius where Jewish activists hid books from German soldiers.

Most of the novel consists of Jewish, German and Soviet documents including diaries, letters, memoirs and interviews with the novel’s participants, including the main protagonists Shmerke Kaczerginshki and Abraham Sutzkever. The Jewish activists in the novel named themselves the “Paper Brigade” which was led by the director of the Vilna Ghetto library during 1941-1943.

Fishman gave a backstory of what Vilna was before World War II being the center of Hebrew and Yiddish printing with a total of 60,000 Jews living in the city, which was a third of the population. Then in 1941 Nazis soldiers started rounding up the Jews and

putting them into the ghetto. Half a year later, most Jews were killed outside of the ghetto, dwindling the population from 60,000 to 20,000.

Many events occurred during the time of war, the main one being when Fishman spoke of how the “Paper Brigade” activist group smuggled books through the Vilna ghetto entry checkpoint. The librarians working outside of the Ghetto collecting books and documents to send to Germany, would secretly “wrap their bodies with books underneath their clothing” while the German soldiers were “on guard patrolling the library,” said Fishman.

The one event which Fishman spoke more in detail, involved the main protagonist Shmerke Kaczerginshki who was hiding Torah scrolls while a high-ranking German official was checking each individual Jew entering the ghetto.

“Torah Scrolls were important to save because German soldiers used the parchment for their combat boots,” said Fishman.

Although others were throwing away food items around him to avoid punishment of the German soldiers, Shmerke could not risk discarding the scrolls because the soldiers would realize who the scrolls belonged to since only one group of librarians worked outside the ghetto. Fishman reached the climax of the event when at the end he revealed when the official, who was a few meters away from the protagonist, became tired and let the rest of the Jews through without inspection. Fishman continued on

telling more stories on how these Jews risked their life saving books for the survival of the Jewish culture rather than food for themselves.

The book lecture attracted large audience of about 60 people, many who had family members involved in the Holocaust including Morris Narunsky.

“My grandparents were in the holocaust, they lost four of their children who were murdered by Nazis at 43...my mother and father were in three different camps as well, fortunately they made it through,” said Narunsky.

Dr. Kelly J. Zúñiga, executive director of the Holocaust Museum also gave insight as to the reason why Fishman was invited to talk about his book.

“The history of Vilnius is very little known, especially in this part of the world and so the story and the importance of saving Jewish culture was so impactful, I wanted to bring that story to this part of the world,” said Zúñiga.

Zúñiga also talked about collaborating with the Yivo institute for Jewish Research in designing a new exhibition for the museum centered around the book. Digital and original documents, as well artifacts, are to be set on display in the exhibit next year.

Reference:

<https://www.upne.com/1512600490.html>