

Looking Back: Memoir of a Psychoanalyst by Paul H. Ornstein with Helen Epstein Published by Plunkett Lake Press, November 2015 © 2015 Paul Ornstein and Helen Epstein Cover: Susan Erony. Pages:192

A Review by J. Swaminathan, Psy.D.

Paul Ornstein begins his clear, courageously written and deeply moving memoir, "Looking Back: Memoir of a Psychoanalyst" (2015), with these recollections: "I have two sets of memories of Hajdunanas, the exquisitely dusty town... in the east of Hungary, where I lived until I was fifteen years old. As a psychoanalyst, I am aware that memories are thought to be newly assembled each time one reaches into one's mind to get hold of them. My memories of the town in which I spent my first fifteen years, however, always emerge with identical images and identical emotions, as if I had to fix these memories in my mind, hold on to them, never to lose them" (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015 p. 7). He continues to describe this memory, made visual, writing, "...We have electricity...and a gramophone on which we can listen to cantorial music, no hot water, no telephone, no radio. Six days a week, the town center is vibrant with commerce. In the 1920s and 1930s Jews own many shops and there are three Jewish doctors. The people do not yet boycott any of them" (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015 p. 8). Reviving a painful memory from history he writes, "The routines of our quiet town allow us the illusion that we are protected against the growing hostility of its people. We are accustomed to garden-variety Hungarian anti-Semitism; Nazis will transform it into an unprecedented murderous kind" (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015 p. 9). Ornstein finds meaning in the act of writing and continues to share his story, writing, "My second set of memories dates from February 1945, after the Russian liberation of Hungary. Even as the war continued west of us, I returned to Hajdunanas, in search of my family--- and found almost no one I knew. My family was gone. Many of the formerly Jewish owned stores were boarded up. To me, Hajdunanas was now a repulsive ghost-town! Of the 250 Jewish families --- about 1,250 souls -- no more than fifty would return....Our Nazified former neighbors had vandalized everything Jewish, including our graves" (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015 p.9).

In his late adulthood, Ornstein also addresses how hard it is to write about events that were not readily made clear to him in his youth. Experiencing this time period slowly, one moment at a time, Ornstein writes, "I roamed the town for three days in February of 1945, almost in a daze, trying in vain to find information about my family... unable to suppress the recurrent images of what it must have been like for my mother and three brothers to live through their stay in the ghetto and their final journey. Sometimes, I burst out crying as I tried to piece together what happened to my family and the community before their deportation to Auschwitz. No one yet knew the magnitude of the devastation" (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015 p. 10). Ornstein will go on to describe a period in history which remains seared in his memory. Reading this account is likely to reawaken many who are silenced by conscious and unconscious prejudices.

The early chapters provide a backdrop with details of Hungarian history and Jewish culture. With fluidity, seriousness and a sense of humor, the book nudges the reader into deeper reflection about life's most difficult questions. The years from 1939 to March 1944 are described as times of growing chaos and "Paradoxically, as life around us became more and more difficult, we became more and more immersed in our lives and study, disavowing the probability that that the dangerous conflagration would ultimately envelop all of us" (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015, p. 39). Ornstein's father returns, "discharged from the forced labor battalion...Jews were still allowed to wear the uniforms of the Hungarian Army" (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015, p. 39). A meeting with Anna Brunn would also come at this time. Paul Ornstein leaves for Debrecen, at his father's insistence, to meet his cousin and finds that he has mistaken Anna for his cousin when he arrives at their door. Ornstein also keeps his dream of becoming a psychoanalyst while studying at the seminary. Facing increasing anti-Semitism and remaining steadfast in his new friendships may be simply stated here. However, in reading these chapters, one cannot escape the enormity of the

task of facing an unexpected and harsh reality, confronting Ornstein, his family and friends. There is the inescapable process of conscription, he describes a dinner with his younger sister Judith, a beautiful photograph can be found on page forty -five. "When I said goodbye to her in 1944, neither of us could imagine that it was final--- that we would never see each other again" (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015, p.45).

Two postcards, one from Anna, with whom Ornstein was "madly in love" (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015 p.47), and another from his brother Zoli, informing him that his mother and two brothers were being deported to an unknown destination, brings one back to Ornstein's earlier realization that they were entering a menacing and dangerous time. Chapter Three captures his conscription and the long and difficult return and reconnection to family and relatives who had survived. The loss of his sister Judith, his young brothers, Zoltan, Tibor and Laszlo and his mother Frida Cziment, stands in stark contrast to the joy and relief of finding Anna, her mother and his father. Evident again, is Ornstein's unfaltering spirit in planning his escape to the West, he would not be traveling alone. He and Anna, now married, having reconnected with surviving relatives and their friends, move to Germany. In this chapter one will learn about their studies in preparation for medical school, life as refugees in Munich and subsequent admission to Heidelberg University. One is introduced to an indomitable spirit, and Ornstein's insight as to how one can make one's own path in a world estranged from itself. Subsequent chapters introduce us to Dr. Ornstein's education, training and his contributions to psychoanalysis. In the later chapters, accounts of work with Balint and Kohut, filled with serious and humorous moments of self-realization, are easy to follow and leave a lasting impression of the psychoanalytic training process, including the making of a gifted psychotherapist. One is given a wonderful introduction to the developments in Self-psychology in Chapter Seven. Lessons in the early developments about psychoanalytic theory and practice in the United States are described in great detail.

What makes this memoir most remarkable is the detailed record of the years that mark the Holocaust as it unfolded in Hungary, the enormity of loss, refugee status, perseverance and Paul's favorite Hebrew mantra: "Gam zu l'tovah" ("Even this can turn out for the good, (Ornstein and Epstein, 2015 p. 11),. This is an intimate account about having lived a life during a most tumultuous and dangerous times in history made intolerable, for some, only because they chose to live within their cultural traditions and were different. Life experiences are described vividly and draw the reader, effortlessly, into the vortex of tragedy, loss, grief and recovery. Memory holds a profound place in human history, and it earns center stage in this memoir. The photographs, included in this memoir, capture the reality of treasured relationships in Ornstein's life. While developments in self-psychology and the shaping of a psychoanalyst makes this memoir interesting, the experience of being Paul Ornstein is perhaps the most compelling reason to pick up this book. Once a reader opens these pages it will be difficult to put this memoir down, there is much to learn from this memoir. At every stage of his life one is moved by Ornstein's greater vision and a search for a deeper understanding of himself as well as others. Helen Epstein (1979), who has written about survivors of the Holocaust and their children with understanding and sensitivity, is a great partner in this process, as is his wife, Dr. Anna Ornstein. Dr. Paul Ornstein remains to the very end of his life, a great student and teacher. He leaves an unforgettable legacy, a life's work that is transformative. This memoir is one more gift, from a great scholar.

#### References:

Epstein,H. (1979). *Children of the Holocaust: conversations with sons and daughters of survivors; with a 30th anniversary preface by the author.* Penguin Books, 352 pages

