

Friday, October 24, 2008

Paul Shapiro Spoke at Genealogy Meeting on Opening the Archives of the International Tracing Service, by Nadene Goldfoot

On Wednesday, October 22, I went to the Mittleman Jewish Community Center for our genealogy program of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon to hear Paul Shapiro from Washington DC speak, a man who fought to open the archives holding 23 miles of records of holocaust victims. The program was co-sponsored by the MJCC who gave us the Chapel for our meeting.

In the program, Paul Shapiro talked about a boy born in 1930. This kid's name was Miki Schwartz, a Hungarian Jew who at age 14 was arrested on April 16, 1944 and taken to Auschwitz, then later to Buchenwald. Young boys had small hands, and they were labor used in underground building places making some kind of weapons. Elie Weizel was one of the boys. They were saved by communist prisoners who wanted to rescue these boys. The reason he lived to tell the tale is because this was so close to the end of the war, and they were used for their labor at this point. His mother was captured and gassed as soon as she had come to the camp. Miki was all alone.

The record keeping of the Germans was just amazing. They wanted the world to know how they did it all. You wouldn't believe the records they kept. They even kept records of the lice in the scalps of some prisoners and how big the lice were: small, medium or large.

You could tell by the last names as to if prisoners were Jewish or not. At least Paul and the audience could. There were other people who were prisoners and murdered also. One guy was a Mongolian from Russia (?) who was an engineer and knew how to build bridges. He died in the camps because many countries (including the USA) would not accept him because of his race. He was not Jewish. Of course, Jews couldn't get out at all.

In the audience was Portland's youngest holocaust survivor. She was 71 years old and looked very good. She's never known what has happened to her family. I saw her being interviewed afterwards by my friend from the Jewish Review, who took pictures. Paulina Olson had a tape recorder and had the lady speak into it for the interview. I was sure lucky that I was born here, or I would have been one of those unlucky ones in the gas chambers. Most survivors are around 80 or more years old today, and there's very few left. All this time, ever since 1945, they've never known what happened or when or where their family died. Through this archive place, they found out for one survivor that his dad didn't die in the gas chambers. He lived to see the Americans liberate his camp, then died 10 days later from starvation. Now his son saw a card with the date of his dad's death on it, which was important to him to be able to say Kaddish. ONLY, the man is now old and in a wheelchair and his son was afraid to tell his father that they found out about the grandfather, as the shock might kill him.

Well, this was one program that I didn't fall asleep in. It was worth the hour's drive there to attend. I must say, that this Paul Shapiro fought about 13 countries including our own USA practically to get the archives to be opened. He fought ever since 1991. They just got them about

2 years ago. It took Greece, home of democracy, to say that they had to vote to open them up. What a story. It seems that Germany really didn't want them to be opened.

The ITS archives are located in Bad Arolsen, Germany. It was started by the Allied powers after WWII to help trace missing family members and reunite families. The sad thing is that only now are the archives opened. This means that family members had never really found missing members. The archive now holds about 50 million digital images on 17.5 million people arrested, deported, killed, forced into slave labor or displaced from homes to where they could never return.

Paul spends most of his time traveling and speaking about the center now. He has a BA degree from Harvard U in government, a Master of International Affairs and Master of Philosophy in History from Columbia U. He was a Fulbright scholar, and IREX scholar, and a visiting Fellow at the Institute for Eurasian Studies at George Washington U. We were lucky to have him speak to us. I believe that it took all those degrees, and his ability to talk to all the different involved nations in the process of opening these files, to have success. Without him, they never would have been opened.

CBS's "60 Minutes" had a story about it that was updated in 2007 that can be viewed at http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=2972691n%3fsource=search_video