

Book by Suslensky focuses on Ukraine's "Righteous"

by Christopher Guly

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OTTAWA - A small crowd of Ukrainian and Jewish Canadians packed into a meeting room in the Center Block of Parliament Hill recently to attend the Canadian launch of Yakov Suslensky's 1995 book, "They Were True Heroes: Citizens of Ukraine—Righteous Among the Nations."

The author, who lives in Jerusalem, was not in attendance. Neither were—the ambassadors of Ukraine and Israel. Ukraine's Volodyrnyr Furkalo was absent because of illness and an ambassador for the Israeli Embassy to Canada has to arrive in Ottawa. Instead, the charges d'affaires from the two diplomatic missions greeted the guests.

Israel's Eli Yarushalmi praised the strong bonds between his country and Ukraine. "There is a new relationship between our two countries," he said. "Israel will be forever grateful to the many Ukrainians who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust."

Ukraine's Andrij Vesselovsky said beyond Ukrainians' heroic acts to help spare Jews from the Nazis, 5 million Ukrainians died at German hands during the second world war. He added that Ukraine is now a place where Ukrainians and Jews live together in harmony. "The Jews of Ukraine compose the second largest ethnic group in Ukraine, with 500,000 people. Conditions are favorable to them—and Ukraine has recognized contributions made by Jews through such actions as renaming streets in honor of outstanding Jewish citizens of Ukraine."

Since only 70 copies of Mr. Suslensky's book—each selling for \$10 (about \$7.50 U.S.) – were available at the launch, the event was more a symbolic show of friendship between the two countries.

But, according to the Ukrainian Embassy in Ottawa, "They Were True Heroes" is the first book published in Ukraine that looks at courageous Ukrainian men and women who risked their lives to save Jews from the Nazis.

Filled with numerous black-and-white photographs yet text-heavy throughout its 157 pages, "They Were True Heroes" focuses more on its message than its look. That is not surprising, considering that its author, a former Soviet prisoner of conscience, has spent a significant part of his life promoting a strong Ukrainian-Jewish relationship.

In the book, Mr. Suslensky, 67, tells the story of numerous heroic Ukrainians. For example, in 1962, the late Maria Babicz became the first Ukrainian to be conferred the title of "Righteous Gentile" by Israel's Holocaust memorial in [Tel Aviv] Yad Vashem. A nursemaid who worked for the Jewish Osipov family, Ms. Babicz saved their daughter from the Nazis when the father, Itzhak, was drafted into the Soviet army.

Unfortunately, Mr. Suslensky does not elaborate on the details of Ms. Babicz's heroism. But he makes up for it in a lengthy section on Ukraine's primate, Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky of Lviv. Titled, "Unacknowledged Righteous Gentile," the chapter focuses on the metropolitan's role in saving Jews and presents a defense in support of Metropolitan Sheptytsky's initial and controversial friendly relationship with Adolf Hitler.

Actually, the defense comes in the form of a 1985 letter signed by 17 Holocaust survivors. They suggested Metropolitan Sheptytsky was caught between a rock and a hard place, and first supported the Nazi occupation of Lviv and Kyiv in 1941 over Soviet rule on a lesser-of-two-evils basis. After all, Ukrainians briefly had their own independent government.

But within a year, the signatories said the Metropolitan sent a letter to the pope writing, "All [Ukraine] now recognizes that the German regime, perhaps even to a greater extent than the Bolshevik, is evil, indeed even Satanic evil ... not a single day has passed without most horrible crimes being committed."

The letter was written to urge the Israeli government: to confer "Righteous Gentile" status on Metropolitan Sheptytsky. That has yet to happen, though Mr. Vesselovsky told guests at the Ottawa book launch that the archbishop's brother, Klementiy, a monk, has received that status.

"During the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, Metropolitan Sheptytsky enlisted the services of 500 monks and nuns to help save Jews from death," said Mr. Vesselovsky.

The names of 200 Ukrainian men and women are inscribed on a memorial wall on the Avenue Of Righteous among the Nations at Yad Vashem. The Ukrainian government plans to commemorate their heroism via similar memorials in Kyiv, Lviv and Odesa.

Born in Ananiev in the Odesa region on May 10, 1929, Mr. Suslensky worked as a schoolteacher in Moldavia (today's Moldova) and Ukraine. In 1970, he was arrested on charges of "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" and was sentenced to seven year's imprisonment.

After serving the full term, Mr. Suslensky emigrated to Israel, where he taught English. He retired in 1987.