[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

ANNOUNCER: You're listening to the Slice of MIT Podcast, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.

JOE MCGONEGAL: This is the MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, Director of Alumni Education. Joining me is Michael Gruenbaum, Class of '53, whose new book *Somewhere There Is Still a Sun* was published this fall by Simon and Schuster and coauthored by Todd Hasak-Lowy.

Michael, thank you for joining me. Why did you choose to write this book now?

MICHAEL GRUENBAUM: Well, there's a little story behind that if I have the time, I'll tell you. My mother made an album of memorabilia of Terezin as soon as we got out of Terezin. It had all kinds of tickets and documents and coupons and everything you could think of. And she made an album of that. And when she passed away in 1974, I inherited the album. I had it. I showed it to a few people from time to time.

But then as I was approaching my venerable age of 80, I thought to myself, I better start thinking about what to do with this. And I finally ended up calling the curator at the US Holocaust Museum in Washington. And she came here and looked at it. And she couldn't believe her luck, because at this time, they get only one document or one letter or something like that. Here there was a whole collection of things. And she just was ecstatic.

And so she took it to Washington and showed it to the entire board of the Holocaust Museum. And they got very excited about it. So I got caught in the excitement.

And I decided I was going to write a children's story and have the bear narrate the story. The bear was the one item that saved our lives. And so I wrote a children's story. And for 2 and 1/2 years, I tried to get somebody interested in publishing it. I got absolutely nowhere. I wrote to about 80 literary agents. I wrote to about the same amount of publishers. Nothing. Nobody was interested.

Some responded by saying that the children that play with Teddy bears are not ready to learn about the Holocaust. And those that are learning about the Holocaust don't play with Teddy bears. So there's a very small window there and they weren't going to invest in that.

But then suddenly out of 2 and 1/2 years later, suddenly, out of the blue, I got a phone call from the editor of Aladdin Books saying would I consider dropping the idea of a children's

book. But instead, they would send a professional writer to Boston to interview me and then write a book for the teenage market. And so I thought about it. Asked if you'd think about it for a few days. I thought about it for about 10 seconds and that was it. Let's do it.

And it was Todd. And he came a couple of days. Interviewed me. I showed him, again, everything I had. And then he went back to Chicago and he started writing. All in all, he did something that I thought nobody could do. He immersed himself into the life of a 12-year-old living under the Nazi regime without having experienced any of that. I didn't think anybody could do that. And he just did a fabulous job.

MCGONEGAL: The book tells the story of your childhood in Prague. You're born in 1930. You're eight, nine years old when the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia. You're put into the Jewish ghetto in Prague for some time before finally you end up in Terezin. You, your sister, and your mother, your father is killed before that. You tell the story, life in Terezin for a boy, through the perspective of the boy. It's very much told in the present tense through to liberation. And some of your life afterwards we hear about.

How on earth do you wind up at MIT five years after the war?

GRUENBAUM: It's a good question. What happened was in 1948, April '48, we left Czechoslovakia because the communists were taking over the government. And my mother saw the handwriting on the wall, didn't want to have anything to do with another totalitarian regime. And we got a visa to come to the United States. However, we were unable to enter the United States, because our quarter number hadn't come up. So we had to go someplace. And we ended up in Havana, Cuba.

In Havana, I was enlisted into an American high school. I didn't know English. I didn't know Spanish. But somehow I managed. As a matter of fact, I did so well, I finished at the high school in two years. And I impressed the principal of the high school so much that he gave me a very good recommendation to MIT.

I don't know how many people from Cuba applied to MIT. It may very well be that I was the only one. I ended up, luckily-- and luck has a lot to do with my life-- luckily, our quarter number came up. In July of 1950 we arrived in the New York harbor. And in September, I started MIT. So it just clicked very well.

MCGONEGAL: Great challenges in writing about-- I can't remember the 1980s. You're doing a lot of memory

here of the 1930s and '40s. And in the Afterword, both you and Todd go back and forth talking about how this was a collaborative process. Talk about the challenges of recalling, but also, as he says, every piece of dialogue in this book is made up, is educated guesses at what was said.

What was hard for you in working through that process with him?

GRUENBAUM: You know, I can tell you one little story. We have this episode where I went to the theater and went there without my star. And I was frightened to death about that. And I went there because I thought the movie was funny. I wanted to laugh for a change. And when I was sitting in the movie, I wasn't laughing at all because I was so scared stiff.

Todd, he just made up a scene of the movie. He just made it up. But it was very funny. And I had to tell him, listen, we have to take that out, because I don't want it to be distracting from the main reason why we are doing this episode. The main reason was that here I come in. I'm so scared to death. You know and trying to eventually really get out without being noticed and then so on.

This scene what we were looking at has nothing to do with this. It could be the funniest thing you could think of, and yet, it doesn't belong there. So I took it out. You know.

MCGONEGAL: There must be still things you're remembering even after now publication. Are there things you wish you still could have put in their? Memory is funny that way. You'll continue, I'm sure after publication remembering things that could have gone in.

GRUENBAUM: One of the things I remember which I didn't get into the book which is that I had a couple of musical instruments in Terezin. One was a harmonica. I learned how to play the harmonica a little bit. And the other one was that we took a comb and we put toilet paper around the comb. And we blew into it. And that made a different sound depending on how you blew.

MCGONEGAL: But these were simple amusements to pass the time and entertain.

GRUENBAUM: Well, this guy, Franta, he was trying to teach us different things. Like he taught us a canon. I don't know if you're familiar with what a canon is. It's where different groups start playing or singing a song at different times. You know? I never knew that. And I learned how to do that. Franta tried to teach us under terrible conditions whatever he could. Either he knew it himself or he brought in some professors who was specialists in certain areas and try to teach us a

little bit about that.

MCGONEGAL: Back to MIT, I'm sure there were students of all types who were involved in the war, veterans and non-veterans alike, refugees. And you put your head in the books and tried to keep your mind out of the last 10 years?

GRUENBAUM: Well, what happened was that-- as I mentioned-- and I was still behind age wise. And so I finished MIT in three years. And I did that by taking more courses. And I took courses in the summertime as well. I was not a stellar student, partially because I had still trouble understanding the language. Competing with valedictions and I don't even know what in the heck a valedictorian is. But I did graduate and--

MCGONEGAL: But how about emotionally, Michael? Was it for you, and there were other survivors, I'm sure there in college with you--

GRUENBAUM: I did not see any, as a matter of fact. I don't recall seeing any. Well, I mean, it's just sort of it's a different life, a new continent, new language, new friends, You start all over again.

MCGONEGAL: I wonder if you'd read a passage for us. Very early on in the book, you witnessed this traumatic event. It's a young couple committing suicide as the Nazis are storming into Prague.

GRUENBAUM: "I stand there not knowing what to do. But soon, that doesn't matter because I see it, them actually. Out of the corner of my eye, the couple face down, still holding hands. Their bodies in the shape of a crooked V which is barely five feet away from marching soldiers who barely seem to notice. I don't see any blood, but that doesn't make me feel any better. No, at all.

I take a few steps to the window and call out, mother. But the word doesn't make much sound. Dozens and dozens of soldiers are marching right past them like the crooked V is nothing more than some sheets someone left outside by mistake. I tried calling mother again, but my throat won't work."

Shall I read to you-- my mother, two days after we were liberated, wrote a letter to the relatives and friends all had managed to leave Czechoslovakia just before the Nazis arrived. Some went to Sweden. Some went to Spain and Portugal. So here she wrote a letter.

And she said, "We do not know yet how the future will shape up for us. None of our old friends are alive anymore. We do not know where we are going to live. Nothing. But somewhere in the world there is still a sun, mountains, the ocean, books, small clean apartments, and perhaps,

again, the rebuilding of a new life." Fantastic.

MCGONEGAL: You also cite a letter from your friend and protector at Terezin, Franta, the end of the book, which is a very powerful letter he writes to you after the war. And when you've written to him, he writes back. And you've been very close with the fellow alumni, there are alumni of the Nesharim. I wonder if there's just one other passage you could read. I just love your reaction to Franta's letter.

GRUENBAUM: "I read the letter two more times hearing Franta's voice in my head a little more clearly each time. I argue with him a little, but mainly as a way to slowly accept that once again just about everything he has to say is true. When I finally look up, I'm a bit surprised to find myself standing in the middle of a bridge in the middle of Prague.

For a moment, I have no idea where to go or what to do. Both ends of the bridge have the same distance from me. There's much to do, too much to see. And I suddenly feel a strange, overwhelming obligation to live some sort of a perfect life, one packed with heroic acts so incredible I can't even begin to imagine what they might be. I take out the envelope, put the letter back inside, carefully return the envelope to my pocket, and start working back home again. I'm almost six years behind in school, which is a lot to be behind when you are already 15 years old.

So here is my grade heroic plan. I'll finish all my homework, every last bit of it before dinner."

MCGONEGAL: Tell me some of the reactions you've gotten to the book. You've done readings. You've done interviews. What about the intended audience, kids?

GRUENBAUM: Well, the intended audience is a question mark, because most of the reaction of the adult is we couldn't put the book down. It's amazing to me. You know? So it hasn't reached the intended audience yet. It should go to schools, and libraries, and so on.

So I haven't really had too many reactions from teenagers. Going to be difficult. You know how it is. The teenagers don't like to read that much anyway in the first place.

MCGONEGAL: Knowing the gift you made in 2010 to the Lewis Music Library at MIT, I was struck by the irony of your lack of appreciation early on for music and playing, was it, the violin? Do you think your parents would find some irony in the fact that you-- now a music library fund bears their names?

GRUENBAUM: My first exposure was really in Cuba. I had a teacher in Cuba who became a very good friend of my ma, sort of a father image, you know? And he had a lot of recordings. And I listened to a lot of records over there. And that's really got me interested, because I was in Havana, I knew nobody. I had no friends, nothing. You know.

I was walking around the streets of Havana with a little notebook translating Czech sentences into Spanish and English, learning how to memorize all those things. And so listening to this classical music was a very good, relaxing thing for me. So I think maybe because I showed some knowledge about classical music that's why maybe I would get hired for this job at MIT. But I just loved the peace and quiet that the music library and the fact that most days you have a little room where you can just sit yourself and listen to music all by yourself.

And the biggest thing that I remember from those days is that the director had enough confidence in me that he sent me to New York to Sam Goody's, which is a place in New York where he bought the record albums for the cheap. You know? And he gave me $200 to buy some records that I wanted to buy for the music library. That really gave me a boost.

MCGONEGAL: Tell me what you're reading right now.

GRUENBAUM: I just finished a book that my son gave me about Burt Bacharach. He was one of my favorite composers. And anyway, I have this recording and a DVD. And I also read this book, *Hunting Eichmann,* which is really a terrific book. It's like a detective story. It was just amazing. They had 50 people involved in trying to abduct him and figure out where he was. And how they did it, is just incredible. And now, I'm reading Atul Gawande *Being Mortal.* It's all about how the doctors really talk to the patients and get them prepared for the possibility of passing.

MCGONEGAL: Michael Gruenbaum's new book *Somewhere There Is Still a Sun* is now available online or at your favorite local bookstore. Michael Gruenbaum, thanks for joining me.

GRUENBAUM: Thank you very much.

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