



SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

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*A Family Story of Genesis,
Annihilation and Survival*



AVI FRIEDMAN

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press

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AVI FRIEDMAN

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In Memoriam

FRYDMAN FAMILY

Avram Frydman, 1882–1941
Rachla (Jutrzenka) Frydman, b.1886
Walca Frydman, 1921–1932
Lea Frydman, b.1923
Meir Jonas Frydman, b.1925
Reuwen Frydman, b.1928

GMACH FAMILY

Chil Dawid Gmach, b.1910
Malca (Frydman) Gmach, b.1905
Mojsze Gmach, b.1937
Rywka Gmach, b.1939
Abram Icchok Gmach, b.1941

BIMKE FAMILY

Aron Szmul Bimke, b.1907
Perla (Frydman) Bimke, b.1911
Israel Moshe Bimke, b.1935
Sura Rojsza Bimke, b.1937
Wolca Bimke, b.1939

KANE FAMILY

Dydie Kane, b.1906
Chaja (Frydman) Kane, b.1913
Faleg Kane, b.1941

FRYDMAN FAMILY (No. 2)

Szmul Josef Frydman, b.1916
Tauba Bina (Litmanowicz) Frydman, b.1918
Avram Chaim Frydman, b.1939

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Preface

Lush green cultivated land stretched out on one side of the road and dense forest on the other when I drove there on a grey summer day. I had just left the Kulmhof Death Camp Museum, near the village of Chelmno some 60 kilometres northwest of the city of Łódź, Poland. In the distance I could see a farmer on a tractor tending to his land. Still grasping what I had just seen in the museum that records the events that took place here, my son and I were silent. After about four kilometres, we turned left to a narrow dirt road between towering trees and came to a stop in a vast clearance walled on all sides by trees. An eerie silence welcomed us. No one was there. Several large rectangles of various sizes, framed by long grey granite stones, were scattered in the clearance's ground. Near some stood monuments with an inscription bearing the names of communities and families who perished here. The insides of the rectangles were covered with small pebbles of white and garish stones. A short distance away stood a concrete wall with an arch in its middle and an embedded inscription in Polish in large black letters which read *pamięci żydów pomordowanych w chelmnie 1941–1945* (in memory of Jews murdered in Chelmno 1941–1945). Plaques of various sizes, some in metal and others in black granite with inscriptions in Hebrew, English and Polish, were affixed to the wall in random order.

I walked slowly near and in between the rectangles, pausing near some as if hoping to find something while trying to contain a burst of emotion. They are resting in these rectangles. My grandmother, uncles, aunts, their spouses and their children. People who I had only heard about and whose names I had seen in documents. There were no graves or stones to pause in front of, just a mass grave. I did not carry with me a photograph of any of them since I never had any. Standing there, I

told them how much I wanted to know them. I kept thinking about my very young cousins hugging their mothers' and fathers' naked bodies as they gasped their last breath of air, screaming in the crowded gas van that was rapidly filling up with carbon monoxide fumes as it moved along the road on which I had just arrived. When the door opened, their lifeless corpses were thrown into a pit on top of others who had died before them, to be set ablaze.

I grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust. A son of survivors who rose from the ashes to start a family. My father was of Polish Jewish heritage and my mother a Sephardi Jew who was deported with her entire community from the Island of Rhodes to Birkenau. They bore scars and carried with them unimaginable memories of loss and brutality. They were among the lucky few who lived.

I had a happy upbringing. Our life was not different from that of other families in the small Israeli town where I was born and grew up. My parents shared with me and my older sister their stories only when we asked. When I was old enough, my father was willing to walk me through some of his recollection of places and experiences. His war-time path took him from the trenches of Gniezno as a soldier in the Polish army at the start of the war to some of the most horrific places that man ever created, in which daily survival was uncertain. Where people were commodities sent to their death when their usefulness ended. He bore witness and acted in one of humanity's darkest moments to tell his story.

What intrigued me most was my father's endurance. I wanted to know how did he live five years in a daily survival mode? Go on for days without food? March many kilometres in the dead of a brutal Polish winter without proper clothing? Not lose hope and give up in the face of extreme adversity? Find the strength to start anew? My mind often kept drifting to the question of what would I have done in such circumstances. Would I have given up?

When I became an adult, I distanced myself from my parents' past. I chose to pretend that their ordeal had nothing to do with me. That the stories I heard as a youngster should be locked in a box perhaps never to be opened. After I left Israel to pursue architectural studies in Canada, I became preoccupied with my own doings and had my family to look after.

Years later, when my children grew older and asked about their ancestry, I came to the realization that I am part of that history and was ready to open that box. As a descendant, I could no longer ignore the past that in many ways had shaped me. By then my father was old and frail, yet his memory sharp. We sat down to record a long conversation in which he chronologically told his family's and his own story of survival. He recalled his ancestry, family, places he has been to, the horrors he witnessed and the miracles that helped him last. Listening to him, I realized that the Frydman family's story is part of my father's survival story. Their faith during those years is an integral part of the whole and needed to be told. My father's upbringing was instrumental in helping him survive.

Building on our conversations, coupled with an extensive archival research and site visits, I constructed a family portrait. I traced documents that filled missing gaps and set important milestones. I learnt about the genesis of the family in the towns of Pińczów and Chmielnik, their move to Łódź, a large industrial metropolis which until World War II was home to Poland's second-largest Jewish community, the events that preceded the start of the war and the war itself.

Through our conversations I acquainted myself with their personalities, the relations between the parents, the parents and their children, between siblings, their schooling and occupations when they joined the labour force, new households they formed once married and their own children. I was interested in their places of living, holiday celebrations and special events. I inquired about Shabbat and the high holidays dinners, and the rituals they kept. Ghetto residency records, ages, prewar occupations, dates of deportation, background reading, testimonies, the Chronicles of Ghetto Łódź and my father's information about life in the Ghetto he gathered from other survivors, provided ample material for tracing the Frydmans' life during the war years until their death in the Ghetto and murder in killing centres.

When contemplating my writing, I realized that larger historic events governed the Frydmans' life and that of my father. They acted in one of history's most intense and brutal periods. Their actions prior to and during the war were part of a larger context that needed to be told to understand the main narrative. Life in small towns that changed hands between empires, the migration of the family to a big city, the

establishment and running of the Ghetto, deportations and killings, and actions conducted by the perpetrators all had a background. The intention was not to recall in isolation a history of Polish Jews, the Holocaust or World War II but to provide a backstage without which the main narrative will be poorly understood. Once again, conversation, testimonies, books, archival material and visits to places were instrumental in the research and writing. I benefited from access to recently uploaded original archival material made publicly available.

Describing the places where life and events unfolded played an important role in the writing of this book. I travelled to Poland, Germany and Italy to see them firsthand, and to gain a better understanding of what took place in them. Small towns and cities, dwellings, cattle rail cars, sites of killing and slave labour centre or their remaining barracks and deportation spots set a valuable physical context that helped compose a sense of place for the descriptions. My training as an architect led to close examination of large- and small-scale maps and building plans. These taught me about community and street life, the distances people walked, what they saw when walking, and how crowded places were, all, I found, of vital importance to the larger story.

When considering the book's genre, I have decided to construct a narrative that recalled the events from an eyewitness point of view. My father's vivid and detailed description made me feel present during his and my relatives' daily life and pivotal moments. I watched my grandmother packing her suitcase before deportation, saw my aunts and uncles undress their children before being forced on to the gas van in Chełmno's killing centre, witnessed my father being processed and tattooed for slave labour in Birkenau or walking exhausted on a death march.

My father survived to tell his story. I kept thinking about the many who perished without a trace, among them my distant relatives who remained in Pińczów and Chmielnik from which they were deported to their death. In large measure, this is their story, too.

What stayed in my mind was the cruelty and the evil ways that were directed against my family because of their faith and for which their lives were brutally extinguished, along with millions of other innocent souls.

If there is a lesson to be learned, it is that hatred never wins. I do hope that the memory of those who were gassed and buried in that forest will never be forgotten.

—Avi Friedman

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