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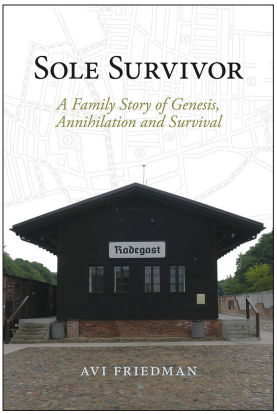

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

ISBN 978-1-77385-694-0

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Birkenau (Auschwitz II)

Crammed into an old freight car, the men who left Eberswalde in August 1943 were not in a mood to speculate about what awaited them. The sad expressions of the women in the dining hall, the subsequent shakedown by the SS and the grim travel conditions were all ominous signs. By now, their experience taught them not to trust send-off speeches by the SS. Still, some held out faint hope, as they were told that they were on their way home and would soon see their loved ones. The voyage, although short in distance, lasted four days. The train stopped often for long periods to let other trains pass. Through cracks in the train car's sides and a small opening, they watched convoys of soldiers and equipment headed east and others with wounded men returning to Germany. On one occasion they stopped near a train with freight cars like theirs from which they could hear conversations in a foreign language. Jewish-sounding names were carved on the wooden walls of their car.

The kind of train that Chaim rode was an instrumental part of the January 1942 Wannsee Conference's plan to annihilate European Jewry. Led by Adolf Eichmann at the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), the Ministry of Transport ferried an estimated three million Jews, first to ghettos and from there to labour or death camps.[1] Managing transports by rail across most of Europe's countries parallel to running its civilian train service and also overseeing military convoys took meticulous coordination.

In addition to the Deutsche Reichsbahn, the Nazis engaged the state railways of Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland and France. Trains transporting Jews were given the lowest priority as far as comfort and schedules, making them stand still for

long periods on hot summer and freezing winter days. Referred to also as cattle cars, they had different dimensions. An average car measured 8.2 metres long by 2.2 metres wide. The accompanying SS troops who knew the ultimate destination and what awaited their passengers treated them accordingly, with beatings and screams of *Mach Schnell!* (Move fast!).[2]

Between eighty and a hundred people were forced into a single car capable of accommodating far fewer for a voyage that lasted days and, sometimes, weeks. The deportees had to stand while others squatted, or they took turns doing either. When entire families were transported, parents attended to children and the very old. Once locked in, food or water were not provided. The only food was whatever they brought along, often not enough due to weight restrictions or the confiscation of luggage upon departure. At times, a bucket of water was placed in the cars of some trains. To prevent escapes and conversations between the passengers and citizens along the route, openings, if there were any, were sealed with barbed wire. With no ventilation, the air turned rapidly stale. A latrine bucket was placed at the corner of each car with no semblance of privacy or modesty. When the voyage lasted a long time, the bucket was filled up rapidly and people used the car's floor, creating an unbearable stench. At the end of long voyages when the destination was finally reached and the doors opened, some of the very weak, the old and the young lay dead.[3]

* * *

Hochman panicked on the train ride's second night. He woke up screaming "They are going to kill us!" Chaim, who knew the man and his family from Bałuty, tried to calm him down, to no avail. He kept repeating his fear of dying, named his family members and recited passages of the Mourners' Kaddish. It occurred again the following night. There was nothing one could do in the dark belly of the car but listen and watch the man slide into distress.

In the early morning of the fourth day of travel, the train stopped once more. Tired, thirsty and hungry people peered through cracks and the opening at the car's top corner to see a town waking up to its morning routines. When a man passed by, one of them yelled aloud:

"Where are we?" The passerby shouted back in Polish, "You are in Katowice!"

"Who are you?" he asked.

"We are Jewish labourers," was the answer.

"Oh, you are going to Oświęcim, about thirty kilometres away," the man from Katowice said.

None of the men on Chaim's car knew what kind of place Oświęcim was.

The town of Oświęcim (renamed Auschwitz by the Germans) in the Katowice region was selected by the Nazis to locate their massive killing and slave-labour operations, for the same reasons that Kulmhof was chosen. It was near a strategic rail hub to which people from across Europe could be brought, and it was away from large population centres to keep it secret. It was also a relatively short train ride away from the major ghettos on Polish territory, such as Litzmannstadt and Warsaw.[4] The camp's grounds were established after World War I to house twelve thousand job-seekers and included twenty-two two-storey brick buildings with red sloping roofs and some ninety wooden barracks. It had also been used prior to World War II by the Polish army.[5]

At the beginning of 1940, when a site for a camp in the Wartheland was sought, Auschwitz was brought to the attention of Heinrich Himmler, and he selected it. Despite the area's swampy land and the horrible groundwater quality, renovation of the dilapidated structures began turning it into the Nazis' seventh concentration camp, better known as Auschwitz I. Rudolf Höss, an experienced camp head to whom is attributed the slogan *"Arbeit macht frei"* ("Work shall set you free") which hung over the camp's gate, was put in charge. Among the first to be imprisoned there were Polish politicians, members of the intelligentsia, resistance fighters and priests.[6]

* * *

The train from Eberswalde reached its destination mid-morning on a hot summer day, August 27, 1943. The doors slid open with a screeching sound and sunlight poured in. There was no station building or platform, just an open area full of lined-up cattle cars. Brown gravel covered the ground. Open fields stretched on one side of the trucks. A short distance away, Chaim could see a row of single-storey red-brick

buildings. In the further distance there were a few village homes that looked abandoned. A group of men wearing blue-and-white-striped clothing, a tag with a symbol and a number attached to the front of their jacket, and each wearing a flat cloth cap approached the train. A few armed SS men stood a distance away, surveying the scene.

"*Raus! schnell! Raus!*" (Out! Fast! Out!), the men in the striped clothing screamed in German and then in Polish.

The group jumped out onto the ground and were instructed to place their belongings near the train.

A tall man in striped clothing ordered them to stand in rows of five, then he called out their names from a list. When the roll call was over, the group began a march for about two kilometres along a dirt road covered with a black, tarlike substance. They passed under the archway of a long single-storey brick building with a sloped red-tile roof and a guard tower-like structure in its middle in which several uniformed soldiers stood. The structure was the meeting point of a two-layered barbed-wire fence with concrete posts topped with lights. The two-layered fence, bearing high-voltage warning signs, with its concrete posts that curved at the top, extended into the far distance to encircle the place with watch towers spread intermittently throughout.

It was an immense site with dozens of single-storey, flimsy-looking brick and painted brown wooden barracks lined up in rows with long straight paths between them.[7] At the end of the road on which Chaim's group walked, there were two chimneys next to concrete buildings from which dark plumes of smoke rose. There was also a strong smell that Chaim could not quite identify. Looking down, he spotted scattered odd personal belongings on the ground. There were torn apart family photos, eyeglasses, clothing and cutlery. It was as if someone had spread around the contents of suitcases in a disorderly fashion while walking, on which many people had stepped. In the distance, women, mostly old, and children stepped out of some of the barracks to the left of the path and older men came out of the buildings on the right.

The marching men stopped at a clearing where an SS officer waited. He approached, surveyed the group and then walked between the rows, inspecting each. After the reasonable amount of food they were fed at Eberswalde there were no walking skeletons among them. The officer stopped in front of Hochman, who cried out and mumbled incoherent

statements in German and Yiddish. He nodded to two of the men in the striped clothing to take him away. Their number shrank to 203.

The SS man returned to take his place at the front and said: "You are in Birkenau. I was given a letter which stated that at Märkisches-Metallformwerk Eberswalde you were hardworking and trained as *Schlosser* (metal workers). In this camp you will be processed and taken to your work camp where you will enjoy good conditions. Is there a sick person among you?" No one answered.

* * *

The construction of the approximately three-square-kilometre Birkenau camp, also known as Auschwitz II, began in the fall of 1941. Located two kilometres from Auschwitz I near the village of Brzezinka, it was originally intended to house Soviet prisoners of war. In the aftermath of the Wannsee Conference and the enactment of the Final Solution, starting in fall 1943 it became a mass-extermination centre, along with Kulmhof, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka and Majdanek that had started killing operations earlier. Following experimentation on Soviet POWs, the chosen killing method was death by asphyxiation, using a fumigation agent called Zyklon B, and the burning of the corpses in either an open pit or a crematorium.[8]

Trains brought victims to the stop at which Chaim had arrived.[9] After disembarking from their gruelling voyage, families were divided in two columns: men and older boys in one, and women and young children of both sexes in the other. Next, both groups were subjected to visual selection by the camp's doctors based on eyesight and age, among other factors. Those fit to work, usually some twenty per cent of them, were taken to the processing centre. Some were selected by Josef Mengele, one of the camp's doctors, for his unimaginably sadistic medical experiments. Those not selected were made to march to their death.[10]

Upon arriving at the gas chambers, under the false pretext that they were about to undergo a shower, they were undressed and walked into one of two windowless, bunker-like buildings, each with a capacity to hold between eight hundred and twelve hundred people. Once they were inside, the airtight doors were sealed, and the killing agent was poured in from above to suffocate the trapped victims within minutes.

11.1 The arrival area in Birkenau in which Chaim's group from Eberswalde disembarked.

Loud sirens blurred the sound of screaming. When verification through peepholes that they all had died, a unit called the Sonderkommando, made up of prisoners who had directed them when they entered and supervised their undressing, transferred the dead, using train wagons, to cremation sites. This followed removal of their glasses, rings, wristwatches, gold teeth and the cutting of women's hair for use in mattresses and ropes. Some six thousand people were murdered each day, sometimes more during the apex of Birkenau's genocidal processes in the second half of May and first half of June 1944. During the busiest killing period, members of some train transports were made to wait in the barracks, sometimes for several days, for their turn in the gas chambers. Over the time of its existence an estimated 1,100,000 people died at Auschwitz I and at Birkenau (Auschwitz II), ninety per cent of them Jews.[11]

The remainder of the extended Frydman family, and their spouses and children who did not perish in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto or at Kulmhof, died in Birkenau's gas chamber.

11.2 Women and men separated upon arrival to Birkenau, ready for selection.

* * *

When the SS officer ended his speech, a Kapo approached and surveyed the group. Suddenly, he cut through the lines and faced Ele Haffurtin, a big man who had been a butcher in Bałuty.

"I know you and your family from Łódź", said the Kapo, in a menacing tone. Chaim learnt later that the Kapo, a man who had run from Polish law enforcement to France years earlier, still remembered a conflict he had with Haffurtin before his escape. "I will make sure that your life will end here like a dog," he said to Haffurtin. Pointing in the direction of the buildings at the back he asked, "Do you see these chimneys? My parents were burnt in these crematoria a few days ago." He then returned to take his place at the front.

Chaim did not know if the Kapo was exaggerating and making veiled threats. Mass killing and burning of people? Even in the brutal

11.3 Women and children are led to the gas chamber in Birkenau following selection.

scenes of the war he had witnessed, burning people sounded extreme. But then, there was that smell and the personal items on the road. Maybe it was true, after all. The severity of his status in this present location dawned on him at once. He was in a very bad place, the worst that he had known.

Led by SS guards, the Kapo and a few men in striped clothing, the priosners arrived at a large barracks. On the way, Chaim helped himself to the remaining sugar he picked up when leaving Eberswalde. Upon entry they were ordered to strip naked and hang their clothes on the hooks that lined the walls. A few men with shaving tools waited. One by one they had all their head and body hair removed. Next, they proceeded to a narrow pool full of disinfecting liquid that smelled like Lysol and descended several steps until it reached the top of their

11.4 A gas chamber's interior.

shoulders. Short men had to be helped through. When exiting the pool at the other end, standing wet, they were handed a striped front-buttoned jacket with a Star of David sown on the top left, with trousers and a cap made of thin canvas and a pair of old shoes, then ordered to get dressed. When Chaim put on the shoes he had been given, they were too small. There was no way to go back. Knowing from his other camp experiences how important having a good pair of shoes was, he panicked and asked other men for an exchange. He finally traded his for a pair that fit. The group then proceeded to a space where they were asked to line up in the alphabetical order of their last names. They then approached a small desk and a chair where someone waited. When seated, they extended their left arm on to which a man with a needle-fitted instrument tattooed a number. Stripped of his civilian clothing, hair and name, Chaim became 144003.

When the processing ended, the group, lined up in rows, walked to the camp's section BII. At the time of Chaim's arrival at Birkenau, typhus epidemics ravaged many of the satellite labour camps. This took

11.5 Men awaiting processing following selection for slave labour duties.

a heavy toll on the imprisoned occupants and on the SS's ability to meet their promised labour quotas for various industries.

A decision was made to keep newly arrived labourers under quarantine for several days, at times weeks, as a precautionary measure before sending them away. During their time of stay, it was also envisioned that they would become familiar with the camp conditions in preparation for their future assigned place.

When they entered one of the barracks, Chaim saw it was by far the worst of the places he had been lodged in since the start of the war. Several light bulbs and two small windows in the front and the rear illuminated the place. Measuring thirty-five by eleven metres, the space was separated by parallel brick walls spread three metres apart on either side of a dirt path. Between the walls, on beams, three

levels of wooden bunk beds were affixed, with the lowest level just above ground. Each bunk bed section had straw mattresses, and a few folded, worn-out blankets. Tall wooden columns and beams held up the exposed roof's rafters. The thin exterior walls were not made to withstand the winter cold, and if heat was to be provided, it would be from the small fireplace and the chimney in the middle of the barracks. In the hot days of August, however, this was the least of their worries. The men were divided into groups of six and assigned one of the bunk sections. The Kapo appointed one of them as the block elder, whose instructions they were to follow. He also listed the camp's strict routines and pointed to the sanitation barracks.

There was not much to do in Birkenau but wait. More than being simply a brief stay in quarantine, for Chaim the place was a rude awakening and a terrifying introduction to the new circumstances of his imprisonment. In the following days, he endured very crowded sleeping arrangements, horrible sanitary conditions and starvation food rations, with two hundred and fifty grams of bread as the meal's key ingredient. When watching from afar columns of women, men and children marching to their death, his thoughts drifted to his family, wondering if they were part of a similar march here or elsewhere. The constant strong stench, the sirens, the crowded barracks, the meagre food, the electric fence, the striped clothing and the menacing Kapos were all warning signs.