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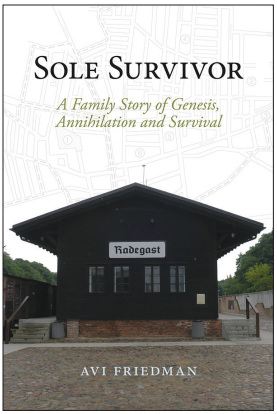

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

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Gniezno

In early 1939 Chaim was summoned to Łódź's military recruitment centre. He was about to turn twenty-one, the mandatory service age. He underwent medical examinations and was found fit for service. His parents and siblings were worried about their son and brother's call to duty, given the winds of war that were blowing from neighbouring Germany in the west and Soviet Union in the east.

Chaim's draft was echoed by the Polish army's preparation and mobilization for a possible conflict. Since its independence following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I, the Second Polish Republic had been under territorial pressures. Both Germany and Russia eyed the lands they had lost. Germany wanted back its former regions of Pomerania, Poznań and Silesia that were heavily populated by ethnic Germans. The tense political climate that dominated the ensuing decades saw the signing of non-aggression agreements and the creation of alliances between nations in case of a war.[1]

The rising tension was the outcome of political events rooted in Germany's humiliating end in the Great War. In addition to losing territories, Germany was asked to pay enormous reparations to the victorious sides. The resentment and the deep economic hardship that followed gave rise in 1920 to a fringe political party that made restoration of German honour and might its main mission. Named the National-Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, better known as the Nazi party, it was led by Adolf Hitler.

An Austrian who had moved to Germany, at the outbreak of World War I in 1914 Hitler volunteered to join the German army, where he reached the rank of corporal. He served with distinction as a runner who relayed messages from the rear to the front and was wounded in action.

In an autobiographical manifesto titled *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), he laid out his political ideology and future plans for Germany and put the blame for the German defeat squarely on Marxism and the Jews, which he called the incarnation of evil.[2]

In the aftermath of the economic depression that swept the world, Germany's economic situation kept worsening. In 1933, following a series of political manoeuvres, the Nazis gained power and Hitler was offered the Chancellorship. Soon after seizing power, the Nazis introduced anti-Semitic laws that stripped Jews of their civic rights and dignity. In some four hundred decrees, they were restricted and cut off from all aspects of public life, commerce and property ownership. On top of such national laws there were state, regional and municipal orders further sanctioning them. In the beginning, Jewish veterans who had fought for Germany in World War I were exempt, but later on, ironically, even they were forced to follow the decrees.[3]

The public hostilities against Jews culminated in 1935 with the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws that separated Jews from the rest of the population. The law guarded German blood and forbade interracial relations. Citizens who were not Aryan, Jews among them, were banned from German society.[4] In the years that followed, conditions kept worsening. On the night of November 9, 1938, following the assassination of Ernst vom Rath, a German diplomat in Paris, by Herschel Grynszpan, a Jewish refugee, the Nazis unleashed a show of force as retribution. Known as *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass), the world witnessed with horror the burning of synagogues, the trashing of storefronts, looting, assaults and the murder of German and Austrian Jews.[5]

The rise of the Nazis to power and the ensuing misfortune of the German Jews was widely reported in Łódź's local press. Polish Jews were not unfamiliar with anti-Semitism, which they had experienced for generations.[6] Yet the scale of the events in Germany seemed to have surpassed their own daily experience. They felt very sorry for their fellow Jews but were powerless to alter the situation across the border. After all, they were Polish citizens, safely guarded by an army, the one to which Chaim was called to duty.

* * *

On the morning of an April day in 1939, tears were shed and hugs exchanged in the Frydmans' home. Parents and siblings bid farewell to Chaim, in a way they had never done before. Knowing that he was joining the army at a time of worsening tension between Poland and its menacing enemies which might end in war, was worrisome. They were hoping that a peaceful resolution to the conflict would be found, yet in their hearts the family was proud that Chaim would be wearing a Polish uniform and stand in defence of their homeland. Rachla prepared a care package, and Avram gave him a small prayer book and some money.

Sitting in the dark belly of the truck that took him with other conscripts to a basic-training camp later that day, Chaim reflected that it was his first time on his own, away from the comfort of his family, his father's sage advice and his mother's affection. Stepping out of his community to be part of a national Polish entity was also new to him. Looking at the men around him, he recognized a few Jewish boys – some from Bałuty – but most were gentile. He was somewhat excited that he was chosen to be a soldier. Being a Jewish soldier in the Polish army was not easy. The late 1930s' sharp rise of anti-Semitic sentiments in Germany spilled into Poland, and extreme right-wing political parties began to express similar views. Some of these ideas and people found their way into the army's rank and file.[7] At times, some of the mistreatment was overt: hostile, demeaning statements or actions made in public in front of non-Jewish soldiers. At other times they were hidden. Then, the special dietary needs of Jews that needed to be respected became a subject of envy. At first, the Polish military permitted the creation of kosher kitchens in some regiments, but, when it became too costly and cumbersome to manage, Jewish solders were given an allowance for food purchases, which proved to be impractical.[8]

When the truck arrived at the basic training camp of the 28th Kaniowski Infantry Division on the outskirts of Łódź, the group disembarked and was made to stand in rows. Commands were shouted and the process of transforming fresh recruits into a trained military force began. Each was assigned an ID number, shaved, given a uniform, a rifle and directed to plain-looking barracks that would house them for the next four months, with only mail exchanges from home. Intense training ensued that spring and summer. Physical fitness had to be an

elevated challenge for Chaim, a city boy, who had scarcely engaged in such gruelling activities before. There was an early-morning rise for a run, weapons training, infantry attacks with a rifle and bayonet, and trench warfare and night reconnaissance were taught and practised. He underwent a personal transformation, acquiring valuable life skills he did not possess and practising some he already had. Surviving in a hostile social environment, lowering his profile and disguising his Jewish identity when needed, he used his charm and talked or traded his way out of difficult situations. He worked with the self-discipline he had acquired at home.

* * *

The month of August 1939 witnessed accelerated military activities. In Germany, detailed plans for Poland's invasion were drawn up and army units were ordered to advance to the Eastern Front. Poland advanced its forces to positions along its western and eastern borders, fearing hostilities from both Germany and the Soviet Union. In late August, Chaim's 28th Dywizja Pichoty Infantry Division was made part of the Poznań Army and was mobilized hastily to the middle section of the western border. The unit was stationed near the town of Gniezno, some forty kilometres east of the city of Poznań, and about eighty kilometres from the German border. It was late summer, the trees were in full bloom and the fields just harvested. The quiet pastoral landscape stood in contrast to the activities that the young soldiers were about to engage in. Digging trenches and buttressing them with sandbags had to be completed in short order.

The month of August also saw a rapid succession of political events. On August 23, a non-aggression pact was signed in Moscow between Germany and the Soviet Union. Known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, it included secret articles effectively dividing Poland, once it was defeated, between the two signing nations.[9] That day Hitler gave Poland an ultimatum on demands that he had made repeatedly in preceding years. He asked for the immediate return of the Free City of Danzig, the establishment of a corridor to that city through the Region of Pomerania and the return of all currently held Polish lands populated by seventy-five per cent or more ethnic Germans that had been lost owing to World War I.

4.1 A prewar map of Poland's eastern part. At the start of the war Chaim was stationed near the town of Gniezno.

The demands were rejected outright by the Poles. Later that day in a speech to his commanders, Hitler declared that "the object of the war is . . . to kill without pity or mercy all men, women and children of Polish descent or language."[10] More German units were sent to the front in the days that followed. The gates were now wide open to war.

There was a marked difference between the strength and capabilities of the Polish and German armies. Poland lacked a modernized military and was outnumbered in the air, on land and at sea. Being a poor nation with a mostly agrarian-based economy, it could only devote a small percentage of its gross national product to weaponry to guard against two strong enemies.[11] The highly mechanized German army had 2,600 modern combat tanks and far more infantry divisions against the 180 tanks of the Poles. The Luftwaffe, Germany's air force, had 2,000 aircraft against Poland's 420, and only a small percentage of the Polish planes were modern. There was also disparity in infantry numbers, with 1.8 million German troops compared to one million Polish soldiers.[12] In addition, the Poles relied on their legendary cavalry, which constituted some ten per cent of its fighting force; their supply lines used primarily slow-moving horse-drawn carriages, an easy target for air attacks.[13]

The second 'strong enemy,' the Soviet Union, was understood as a Communist menace by the different factions of the Polish politicians and intelligentsia. This was based on the experiences of the 1919-1920 Polish-Soviet/Polish-Bolshevik War and contrasted with Hitler's racist "grand abstractions" about the Soviet Union's Judeo-Bolshevik myth based on no experience of direct engagement.[14] The Polish state harboured no illusions about how the Soviet Union could eliminate groups labelled as enemies and devastate foreign relations. Many state elites of the later 1930s were veterans of the 1919-1920 Polish-Soviet War and had lost friends to the Red Army and the Soviet state police. Polish diplomats had observed the shocking Soviet-made famine in the Ukraine in 1932-33, and by 1936-37, they recognized ethnic cleansing against Poles in the western Soviet Union and increased animosity against the Polish state.[15]

In the early hours of September 1, 1939, Chaim walked up to the trench under the rumbling sound of endless squadrons of airplanes flying east. Germany's massive air attack, known as the Blitzkrieg,

was part of the war plan's initial phase and was meant to destroy all strategic Polish installations such as bridges, communication towers and ports, to cripple the enemy and then be followed up with a swift land attack. Spreading fear and terror by dropping payloads on civilian targets was also part of the plan. Despite international conventions that prohibited bombing cities that did not harbour armies, no town of any size, including its city centres, hospitals and homes, was spared, turning citizens who lost loved ones and everything they owned into refugees in their own nation.[16]

At 8 a.m. on September 1, the Germans and their Slavic allies launched a coordinated ground attack on Poland's northern, southern and western borders where Chaim's unit was stationed.[17] It began with an artillery barrage that lasted all day, during which he clutched his rifle and ducked under his helmet. There was not much that could be done except to wait and hope. Polish artillery units fired back. From his post he could hear injured comrades calling for help and he saw medics rushing to offer first aid to badly injured ones. The training did not prepare him for the frightening sounds of exploding shells and the sight of mutilated bodies. It fell eerily quiet at night. In the misty morning hours of the next day, a row of enemy tanks appeared over the horizon. More bombardments followed. As the tanks made their way to the defence lines, Chaim could spot infantry soldiers sheltering behind them. It was his time to open fire toward the approaching enemy. The tanks kept moving forward. His regiment seemed to have held back the enemy until nightfall, unlike other sections of the defensive line that were broken.

Fearing being encircled, the following morning Chaim's regiment was ordered to retreat to a new defence line a few kilometres westward. The retreat was part of the Polish army's strategic defence plan of slowly withdrawing their army to the Narew, Vistula and San rivers until France and England respected their prewar agreement to come to Poland's aid in case of German attack by opening a western front. It was assumed that the Germans would not risk a parallel war against two such mighty armies.[17] On September 2, the British and the French issued an ultimatum to Hitler to withdraw his troops within twelve hours. It was ignored. The Allied promise was not respected. A second front was not opened and in the days that followed Poland was left

4.2 Hitler viewing marching troops in Poland.

fighting for itself. It was overrun, with regions and cities rapidly falling into German hands.[18]

The retreating regiment moved to its new post on foot through fields and forests and along roads. Fatigued, dirty and stunned, the soldiers hardly spoke to one another. Narrow roads were clogged with long lines of civilian refugees. On their backs, in their hands and on carts they carried whatever they could salvage. Men pulled two-wheel carts full of belongings. Farm animals were tied to some of the carts. Mothers held infants in their arms or extended hands to crying toddlers. Old people walked slowly, pausing to rest from time to time. Bewildered, the faces of the marchers told the horror of what they had just experienced and their worries of the unknown.

Suddenly, piercing the clouds and flying low overhead, a German attack airplane dove and started firing at the column. Chaim could see

4.3 The aftermath of an air raid by the Luftwaffe in Poland.

the pilot's face. Screaming, people ran for cover in every direction. A second plane followed behind, shooting more rounds and disappearing into the horizon. Some soldiers began shooting at the plane. When the attack stopped, people returned to a scene of carnage. Crying children hovered over dead parents or siblings. Parents sobbed over children or their own parents who could not run fast enough. Dead animals, cut to pieces, with some tied to carts, lay in the middle of the road or in ditches.

When his unit was called to order and continued marching on after the air attack, Chaim thought about the enemy Poland was facing. Who would mercilessly kill defenceless mothers, children and old people? He was a soldier who swore to fight and die for Poland, but these were innocent bystanders who happened to be Polish. His thoughts drifted to the family he left back home, wondering about the fate of Łódź.

* * *

Rachla and Avram immediately thought of Chaim when Łódź radio broadcasts announced the start of the war. Loud sirens sounded at midday when attacking planes bombing installations were spotted on the outskirts of the city. Unlike the surrounding towns, Łódź's centre was spared. The Nazis, planning to turn the city into the capital of annexed lands, avoided casualties to the sizeable ethnic German population, hence the air offensive was minimized.[19]

In the early days of the war, radio broadcasts and newspapers reported heroic resistance and even victories by the Łódź Army, giving people hope that the city would be spared. However, after initially putting up a strong fight, the Polish defences collapsed, and the army retreated from its positions east of the city. The mood got worse days later when a frantic broadcast was made calling men between the ages of sixteen and sixty to come to defence of the capital. Few responded. The airwaves went quiet when planes took down communication towers. When it became evident that the city was about to fall, a mass exodus began. Fearing retribution, politicians, high-level bureaucrats and wealthy people, with many Jews among them, left the city with their families toward the Russian border, by whatever means they could muster. In the opposite direction, long convoys of refugees from bombed-out small towns flocked to the city to stay with relatives or to just find shelter.[20]

On September 7, the victorious German army rolled into the city. Rows of armed vehicles and battalions of marching troops paraded along Pietrkowska Street and were loudly welcomed by ethnic Germans who saw them as their liberators. Kisses were blown, flowers were thrown, and right hands raised in the Heil Hitler salute. A formal welcome ceremony was held at Plac Wolności (Freedom Square) at the top of the street.[21]

A reign of terror directed at Jews by ethnic Germans, who only days before were law-abiding citizens, began in the days that followed. On the streets, people were stopped randomly, their beards and sidelocks cut as acts of humiliation. Others were picked up and made to perform degrading acts such as cleaning railway stations, army barracks and streets. Thugs barged into apartments to beat up and rob the Jewish occupants or declare themselves the place's new property owners. There was no one to call for help. The local police force disintegrated, taken

over by the new German regime. Whereas most of mayhem took place close to the affluent part of the city centre to which the Frydmans' three married older daughters and their families had moved, the people of Bałuty were not spared. Like other Jewish families, Avram, Rachla and their three children had only one thing left to do: lock themselves in the apartment and hope that things would soon return to normal.[22]

On September 13, Hitler, arriving by air, came to see his victorious troops, to congratulate their commanders and drive through the spoils of war. Once again, cheering ethnic Germans, many of them youth who had spent summers being indoctrinated in Germany, lined the motorcade route to thank their saviour. Formal decrees were issued in the following days. As announced by posters on city's walls, on September 18 all bank accounts of Jews were frozen, permitting them to carry only two thousand złoty. The same day they were barred from manufacturing and trading textiles, which robbed many of their livelihoods and income. Commissioners were appointed to run Jewish-owned plants, soon to be followed by other more restrictive rules. Polish Jews began living through an accelerated version of what had been taking place in Nazi Germany since 1933.[23]

* * *

With the intensity of rapidly occurring events, time seemed to have lost its order and Chaim lost track of the days. It was late in the afternoon at the end of the war's second week when his regiment arrived at the newly assigned defence line at the edge of a dense forest. In feverish preparation to face the approaching enemy, the soldiers were ordered to dig personal trenches. They remained there for two days listening to constant artillery shelling in the distance. Early on the third day, they were told that the defence line was broken north of where they were, and a new order was issued. Realizing that Warsaw was at risk of falling, Chaim's regiment was ordered to retreat and set up a defence line about ten kilometres west of the capital, which they were to reach on foot.

Another gruelling march of exhausted, unshaven, hungry, rifle-carrying men began. Polish army vehicles, mangled, overturned and some burned, littered the fields and ditches on either side of country roads. Corpses could be seen inside some of them. Dead soldiers, shot

by attacking airplanes, lay nearby. A distance away, a poorly staffed, makeshift hospital full of bandaged men, some missing limbs, was visible. The soldiers walked for two days, stopping for a rest in bombed-out villages and forests until they reached a hilly area where, once more, they began to dig. The fast-approaching enemy started shelling early the following day. There was little firing back from the Polish side. Enemy tanks and infantry units followed. It was a ferocious exchange, with Chaim's regiment running out of munitions as the day wore on.

Later that day, rumours started circulating that the Red Army had crossed the eastern border. Fighting the German attackers in the west, the Poles moved most of their elite army units to that front, leaving their border with the Soviet Union largely exposed. On September 17, the well-equipped eight hundred thousand-soldier Soviet army invaded Poland in multiple places, opening a second front.[24] The defenders knew that the Polish army would not be able to sustain an attack by another mighty enemy and that their country was doomed. Their morale spiralled rapidly downward. As night fell, the fighting took a pause. An occasional exploding shell sounded from time to time. Chaim tried to get some sleep. Suddenly, his platoon commander appeared in the dark overhead.

"Frydman," he said "We are encircled and have received permission to lay down our arms in the morning. We heard rumours that, when Polish units surrender, the Germans single out Jewish soldiers. Some said that they are executed on the spot. Others say that they are imprisoned under harsher conditions or sent to labour camps. You can surrender with us or run away on your own. Let me know in the morning what you have decided."

Chaim was shocked and deeply frightened. The thought of being executed for being a Jew had not entered his mind, let alone surrendering. He was certain that under any circumstance he would be subject to the same rights that all prisoners of war, including Poles, were entitled.[25] It was a difficult decision to make. If he was to leave on his own, where would he go? To the east, he would have to cross the capital region, which was about to fall into German hands, and further east a war with Russia was raging. If he was to make the 150 kilometres back to Łódź, he would have to pass through territory that had just fallen into German hands, and he would risk being shot if captured. And then

4.4 Polish soldiers surrender to German troops near Tuchola Forest.

how could he travel such distances in the first place, with rail service crippled? Upon arrival in Łódź, would he be able to enter the city unnoticed? And most important, what would happen to his family? It was a sleepless night.

When morning broke, Chaim's comrades were preparing to lay down their arms. He approached his commanding officer and handed him his rifle. "I will try to make it to my home in Łódź," he told him. The mood was sombre. He shared hugs and said his goodbyes to the men with whom he trained for months and fought alongside for weeks.

Walking southeast through fields and forests, Chaim tried to avoid roads. At midday he reached an abandoned village. Clothes were still hanging out to dry in one of the houses. Throwing away his uniform, he put on a pair of pants and a shirt. In another home he found a jacket, a hat and an old pair of shoes that fit. Looking like a peasant, he

continued his march, at times weaving in with columns of marchers, disguising himself as a survivor of a bombing raid on a nearby town. On occasion he hopped on the back of a carriage or a truck, sitting among children and old people. He walked by destroyed homes with only chimneys left standing. He spent the nights in abandoned houses, scavenging for food or buying it when he could, fighting his never-ending hunger and fatigue. He evaded German troops who had manned newly set-up checkpoints at key intersections and, from afar, watched enemy army convoys headed east.

After two weeks, he reached the edges of Łódź on a late afternoon in the first week of October, not knowing what awaited him. The days had grown shorter and colder, and the foliage had turned yellow. He waited for night to fall. From his hiding place he watched German military vehicles and soldiers patrol the city. He walked down deserted streets toward Bałuty, past Nazi flags draping the façades of administrative buildings and hung from balconies and lampposts. The constant humming sound of the cotton-making spindles at Poznański's factory was gone, no plumes came out of the smokestacks, and the buildings were dark and lifeless. When he reached his neighbourhood, he crossed lanes and snaked through the alleys.

Arriving at his building, he watched to see that no one saw him and climbed the stairs. Knocking on the door, he could hear a commotion and his mother's voice wondering in fear, "Who can it be at this hour?" He could also hear Lea and Ruven's voices. When the door opened a crack, light spilled out. Standing in the dark he could see his father's head peering out.

"Who are you?" Avram asked not recognizing his unshaven son in the dim light.

"It's me, Chaim," he answered.