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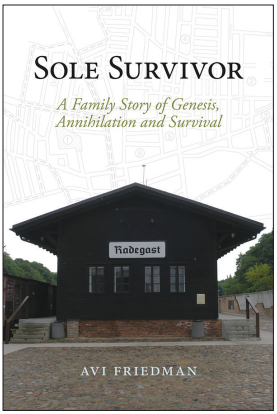

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

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Traunstein

Chaim's arrival at Traunstein marked the end of a prolonged nightmare that had started in the trenches of Gniezno as a Polish soldier in September 1939 and ended as a survivor of a brutal march in May 1945. He was forced to witness firsthand and to act in the thrall of one of history's most horrific events. It was a mystery to him why his life had been spared when so many men his age had met their end in the cruellest of ways. His body and spirit bore scars that called for healing and his life for a new beginning. The transition from being a prisoner who for years wore a striped uniform and lived under daily risk of dying to being a civilian was overwhelming. Finding the whereabouts of the family he had left behind, whom he had thought about often, was at the forefront of his mind. There were also mundane, immediate concerns like where to stay, how to find food and how to get identity documents.

Traunstein's urban make-up was typical of a small medieval town of its size. The five-storey buildings in the town's centre bore their year of construction on their colourful facades. The town hall and St. Oswald's Church faced the market square from which narrow meandering streets extended in every direction, some leading to the breweries for which the place is known.

The small Bavarian town in which Chaim's life as a free man began was representative of Germany before, during and at the war's end. With a committed base of Nazi support, in 1938 this city with a large Catholic population expelled its Jewish citizens, who had lived there for centuries, to ghettos in the east and eventually to killing centres.[1] Located some one hundred and forty kilometres from the notorious Dachau concentration camp, Traunstein was also the place near which, only days before Chaim's arrival, some sixty marchers from Dachau

were massacred.[2] During the war, the town was the target of several air raids by the Allies, which left sections of it in ruin.

The administration of Traunstein's civic institutions was now overseen by Allied forces, and in the days after the war's end the town, much like the rest of Germany, was in disarray. Ethnic German refugees fleeing eastern lands that were overrun by the Red Army flocked there and lived in makeshift housing. Civilians who had worked for the Nazi apparatus were left unemployed, and many families mourned sons who had died fighting. It had a defeated spirit that had just begun to discover and come to grips with the crimes that its leaders, and by extension they, had committed and the damage inflicted on innocent people right in their town's backyard. Citizens walked quietly, fearing revenge by the just-freed prisoners. Some were taken by the Americans to witness the piles of bodies in Dachau and to bury them. Women hid, afraid of being raped, which happened on an enormous scale in zones captured by the Soviets.[3]

When enquiring at the American Army's local headquarters about a lodging place, Chaim was directed to the District of Traunstein's convalescence centre at the edge of town near Lake Chiemsee. Established by the SS in 1942 in a former hotel and spa, it also operated one of the Dachau small subcamps, whose prisoners were involved in the place's maintenance and renovation.[4] The centre was crowded with displaced people like him, survivors from many nations with malnourished bodies whose ordeal happened to end here. He found it ironic that his first place of living was an SS convalescence centre. It was awkward at first to sleep alone on a single bed in a small room, to wake up when he felt like it, to eat as much and when he wanted, to not hear shouting and barking dogs and to walk free in civilian clothes. It was a rebirth into a world that his mind slowly began to get accustomed to.

It was a sunny spring day when Chaim walked the streets of Traunstein with people he had recently befriended. Like him, they were young Polish Jewish men and women whose war ordeal ended in this place. By then, he had been in the town for several weeks. He weighed barely forty kilograms, his bones were showing, and he was in a very poor health. Like many of his peers, after not eating properly for years and having starved for weeks in the war's last months, his digestive system was in ruin. He needed to teach himself how to eat

15.1 Survivors at the Traunstein displaced persons' camp celebrating a Jewish holiday.

anew. Like many survivors, at times he engaged in binge-eating that for some ended tragically. Sanitary conditions, sewer and water systems in Traunstein were also poorly maintained. Food that needed to be kept refrigerated was not.

One evening, he felt a slight stomach pain and developed a fever which in the morning grow more severe. He told himself that it would pass, but it did not. By midday, he had a headache and diarrhea. Standing on a busy street corner, he suddenly felt dizzy and collapsed. His friend stopped a military vehicle which rushed him, unconscious, to a local hospital. He had typhoid. Somehow able to avoid it many times in camps where the epidemic raged, he did not escape it now. For days his life hung in the balance as his weak body gathered remnants of strength to cope with an illness which after the war claimed the lives of

many survivors. After days in a coma, he miraculously regained consciousness and was brought back from the dead.

He would never understand why a team of nurses and doctors of a nation that only weeks earlier almost killed him so savagely were now dedicated to saving his life. It was the guilt they felt, he speculated. Seeing the number tattooed on his arm and his skeletal figure made them realize the immensity of the dark world into which they had followed their leaders. After avoiding days of rest in labour camps' infirmaries, he ended up in a hospital at the war's end. The medical staff seem to have taken a liking of him and went out of their way to help. His outgoing personality, communication skills and fluency in German aided in his slow road to recovery. The weeks he spent there were the much-needed convalescence period that help him heal under supervision and with proper medication. The guidance he received educated him about the food he must eat and what to avoid as a result of the damage caused by years of malnourishment.

* * *

In early July 1945, Chaim left the hospital. Gaining weight, he felt sufficiently strong to resume life and returned to the former SS convalescence centre. In the weeks prior to his illness, he had added his name to survivors' search lists put out in Traunstein and sent requests to other locations run by international refugee agencies, hoping that a relative might notice it and reach out to him. He carefully pored over other lists in search of a surviving family member. Nothing came up. After years in the camps, he had conflicting notions. Recalling the marchers to the gas chambers in Birkenau, he knew that his older parents and very young nieces and nephews could not possibly have survived a selection upon arrival in whichever killing place they had been sent to. But what about his siblings and their spouses? Some were not much older than him, and even the young ones like Lea, Meir and Ruven were old enough to pass a selection and be assigned to work. When he saw them last, they were healthy and some, like Ruven, took after Rachla, with their blond hair and blue eyes that may have helped them escape and present themself as Poles. Watching men and women around him rejoice after finding surviving relatives made him hope that his turn would come soon.

The next natural step in his search, he thought, should be to travel back to Łódź, hoping that a member of his family would do the same and meet him there. Then, news reached him in Traunstein. A survivor, a friend from Bałuty who went to Łódź to find his own family, returned and told a story of the immense devastation. Chaim learnt the details of the Ghetto's establishment, life under Rumkowski's rule, work for food, starvation, the raids, the transports to Kulmhof, the gas-van killings and the deportation of the remaining community to Birkenau. The man also advised him that, if Chaim was considering any sort of a future in his native land, he should forget it. He was not wanted there.[5]

News about the wave of anti-Semitism that swept Poland after the war reached Chaim. Survivors of one of Europe's prewar largest Jewish communities returned to Poland to encounter resentful "are you still alive?" sentiment.[6] Their homes were occupied by others and their possessions and businesses looted. Old blood libels of killing children and using their blood for religious rituals sparked riots against Jews in several cities. In the city of Kielce, one claimed the life of forty-two Jews.[7] The number of those killed in the years 1944 to 1946 is estimated to be between 1,500 to 2,000.[8] Most of the murdered were camp survivors and those returning after years of hardship in Russia who were falsely accused of spreading communism.

As the war's epicentre, Europe was also in a profound political transition and the redrawing of many of its nations' borders. In February 1945 at the Yalta Conference, the war's victorious parties divided the continent into spheres of influence.[9] The Soviet Union swallowed much of the land and nations it liberated from the Germans in eastern Europe, in which it installed sympathetic governments that went on to embrace communism. German territories were partitioned into four occupation zones, and a framework for reparations was put in place. In Western Europe, democratic elections took place and new governments took power. The continent at large faced an enormous challenge of rebuilding its ravaged cities, ruined infrastructure and devastated economies. As for the Jewish communities in those nations, most of them were shattered, their members killed and, as in Poland, in some other places they were not welcomed back or had nothing to return to.

In the weeks that followed, Chaim kept adding his name to updated survivors' lists and waited for news. He also attempted without success

to find out about a second circle of relatives, like his uncle Hershel and Mendel's sons in Warsaw and their families.[10] Gradually his hopes and spirit were dashed. He thought that if any of his siblings survived, they would reach out to Mendel, their uncle, who they knew lived in Israel and would try to find information through him. He began to comprehend and come to terms with the hard-to-digest reality that he might be the only one left. He was haunted by remorse and guilt that he had not been there to support them in their dark days and years, to say proper goodbyes, to thank his parents for the wisdom they gave him that helped him survive an unimaginable ordeal, and to meet and hold his nieces and nephews. On a larger scale, his survival was miraculous, as only seven thousand to ten thousand Jewish citizens of Łódź are known to have remained from a prewar community that numbered two hundred and thirty thousand.[11]