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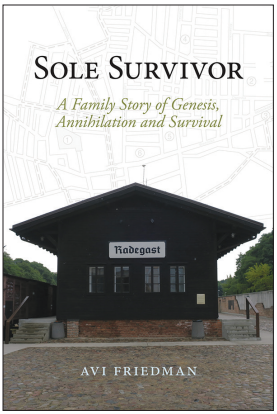

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

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Eberswalde

Standing at the Reppen train station, Chaim could hardly believe his good fortune. The winter months at Kreuzsee Bei Reppen had taken a heavy toll on his body and spirit. He had no doubt that he had been saved from a certain death. The men who waited with him under guard for the train to arrive surely felt the same way. Waiting near the station's two-storey, long red-brick building with arched windows, looking at the passing people in the orderly and meticulously kept square in front and behind, he witnessed a scene that he greatly missed – normal civic life. By now he knew many of his group members well, both from home and from the two camps to which they had been sent. The secrecy that had governed their other trips prevailed here, and speculation about their future place of work abounded. Fearing the worst, some wondered out loud if it would have been better to be sent home.

They boarded a train in the early afternoon. Seated on a wooden bench, Chaim gazed at the forests and the fields, wondering when the nightmare he was living would end. Would he be able to travel back to Łódź and resume the life he was hoping for but that was so abruptly interrupted? As the day turned to night, the train paused to let eastbound military trains speed forward. Reading the German-sounding names of the stations they passed revealed that they had left the annexed Wartheland area and were traveling into old Reich territory.

The train came to a stop at dawn in Eberswalde. The SS soldiers shouted commands for the men to disembark and arrange themselves in rows of three. The sun rose when they began a march along empty roads. Walking in forested areas, they could spot citizens in homes nested between tall trees, peering through windows, curious who these marching men were. On reaching the city, window shutters in tall,

colourfully ornate apartment buildings with red roof tiles opened; occupants stepped out onto balconies, looking down. The group marched past the city's market square where stores on the ground floor of buildings with colourful facades were ready to welcome patrons. A scent of just-baked bread from a bakery filled the air. They walked on meandering narrow cobblestone streets by the town hall and the church. From the centre of town, they were directed into the town's industrial area with its streets lined with tall buildings. They entered a gate and a well-kept yard which resembled a cemetery ground and arrived at a large stone-clad building that resembled a monastery, near which a sign read Märkisches-Metallformwerk (steel-casing factory), the headquarters of the company to which they had been assigned. It all looked so serene and clean compared to the muddy soil and barracks they had just left behind.

Located sixty kilometres northeast of Berlin and with a history that dates to Paleolithic times, Eberswalde (forest of the boars) had a population of fifty thousand at the time of the war. In an area known for its sprawling forests, many of the capital's wealthy residents had summer homes in the suburbs. The town was also an industrial hub recognized for its efficient steel mills and metal-working factories. A strategic advantage of the place was inherent in its geography. A canal that connected the town to northern ports ran through it and a rail line linked it to other parts of Germany, which facilitated shipment of finished goods by land and water. Those same advantages made Eberswalde an important manufacturing hub for the war effort, particularly in ammunition production. During the war several fabrication complexes employed thousands of forced labourers and prisoners of war from many nations.[1] These complexes usually had an administrative building, workshops where people cast metals and fashioned parts on machine tools, a power station with a smokestack and underground storage bunkers, each with approximately a ten-thousand-ton capacity.[2] Train cars reached the plants and stopped near loading docks, much like in the factory where the group had arrived.

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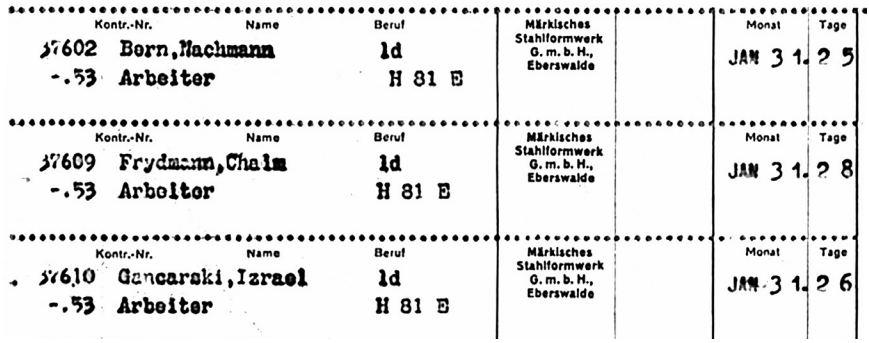
The orderly approach that marked Chaim's arrival at other work locations repeated itself at Märkisches-Metallformwerk. Shortly after the



Kontr.-Nr.	Name	Beruf		Monat	Tage
37602	Born, Machmann	ld	Märkisches Stahlformwerk G. m. b. H., Eberswalde	JAN 31.	25
-.53	Arbeiter	H 81 E			
37609	Frydmann, Chaim	ld	Märkisches Stahlformwerk G. m. b. H., Eberswalde	JAN 31.	28
-.53	Arbeiter	H 81 E			
37610	Gancarski, Izrael	ld	Märkisches Stahlformwerk G. m. b. H., Eberswalde	JAN 31.	26
-.53	Arbeiter	H 81 E			

10.1 Chaim's name on a list of Eberswalde's Märkisches-Metallformwerk labourers.

SS troops who brought them were replaced by local guards, the civilian head of the plant, a man in his late sixties, came forward. Hearing his voice and watching his demeanour, Chaim sensed a measure of decency far different than the brutality of the SS officers. Standing in the meticulously landscaped yard, he introduced himself by his family name, Deutschland, and said that they would be working in an ammunition factory. He noted that he was aware that they were not metal workers and therefore some would be trained in using machine tools. Given the war's demands, the work would be done in three shifts. He insisted that discipline must be maintained, rules respected, and lateness, attempts to leave the factory's premises, sabotage or theft would not be tolerated.

The plant was made up of several tall and long flat-roofed prefabricated industrial buildings painted white. Near the tall ones stood several one-storey grey structures. The compound ran perpendicular to the canal in which large barges were docked. The workers' sleeping barracks were in a fenced area a short walking distance from the plant. The factory's foreman then read their names, asked for their occupations, and proceeded to form subgroups based on assigned tasks. To Chaim's relief, he was made a member of the plant's maintenance team, which meant that he was exempt from night shifts. The men were then taken to a dormitory-type building and assigned eight to a room furnished with beds, blankets, pillows, sheets and storage cupboards.

10.2 The Märkisches-Metallformwerk plant was made up of several tall and long buildings. Near the tall ones stood several one-storey grey structures.

Spring turned to summer with trees and flowers in full bloom. It took the experience of Kreuzsee Bei Reppen for the men to appreciate their good fortune and favourable treatment at Märkisches-Metallformwerk. Chaim's work started at dawn with building cleaning duties, followed by unloading deliveries and gardening. It was a full day of hard work but one that he preferred to night shifts. Sundays were devoted to rest, personal care and washing clothes. Meals were served in the dining room where the factory's civilian employees also dined. A large photo of Hitler adorned the wall. The group's young, single and German-speaking men were liked by the women who worked in the kitchen, some of whom were Polish and Russian. For most of them, eating sufficiently and hoarding extra food became second nature.

The men tried their best to satisfy their new masters, and their dedication was valued. When one man who assisted in moving the plant's small locomotives around was falsely accused of sabotage, Deutschland, the plant manager, came to his aid and proved the accuser wrong. There was also some compensation for the work, of which the lion's share went to the SS who had contracted them.[3] Working with

civilians offered them opportunities to buy used clothing when theirs were worn out. They also learned the value of camaraderie and bonded into small groups of friends who supported each other.

In his daily work encounters with common Germans, Chaim badly wanted to blend in. He decided that a good first step would be to change his name, so he began introducing himself as Herman. He valued the dining in common, being served the same food, and the conversation he had with civilians who seemed decent and informed him about the war. He asked himself if these were the same people who held a deep-rooted hatred of Jews. He wondered if they knew about the ravaging of Poland, the brutal killing of innocent people and the goings-on in places like Kreuzsee Bei Reppen.

The residents of Eberswalde were aware of what happened to the Jews who, from the fourteenth century onward, had lived among them. Some two hundred Jews resided there when the Nazis rose to power. On November 9-10, 1938 – Kristallnacht – the ornate local synagogue set in the heart of a neighbourhood was ransacked and set ablaze, and Jewish-owned stores were vandalized.[4] In 1942, as in the rest of Germany, Jews were rounded up, their properties were confiscated, and they were sent to concentration or forced-labour camps and to eastern Ghettos like Litzmannstadt, in preparation for their annihilation.[5]

Citizens heard broadcasts filled with anti-Semitic speeches by Hitler and Goebbels that labelled Jews the incarnation of evil. Many citizens were devoted Nazi party members. Their sons served in the SS or the Wehrmacht and had sworn to defend the Motherland to the death. The men who operated the gas vans, starved people in ghettos and who in the Einsatzgruppen shot men, women and children in forests, came from towns like Eberswalde. As was the case with the secrecy that characterized other Nazi activities, common citizens may have been spared the details of the killing.[6] The executioners had to adhere to the outmost secrecy when recruited, but knowledge often filtered out to the public.[7] The oppressive Nazi regime targeted the few who spoke out or refused to take part in such activities and sent them concentration camps, where many died.

* * *

As the summer of 1942 turned to fall and the days got colder, Chaim's work assignments in Märkisches-Metallformwerk also changed. Parallel to the maintenance work, his team was called often to take part in loading artillery shells onto waiting trains. It was a gruelling task. He lined up at the storage bunker, was handed a shell that weighed, depending on its explosive capacity, between twenty and forty kilograms, placed it on his shoulder and walked to a rail car, where it would be placed in a special holding unit, and then went back to the bunker for another one. His shoulders and legs were sore at the end of his twelve-hour shift, and he fell asleep immediately.

Chaim's shell-loading assignment intensified in the winter of 1942-43 a result of the new circumstances on the Eastern Front. After a pause the previous winter, the Germans changed strategy and withdrew their Moscow offensive, suddenly judging it to be of a minor strategic importance. At Hitler's orders, two new objectives were set. The first was to capture the vital oil-rich fields of the southern Caucasus. The second, to take the city and region of Stalingrad, a place of immense strategic value.[8] The city was an important military manufacturing hub, producing much of the equipment and ammunition for the Red Army, which Hitler was hoping to capture intact. In addition, the Volga River which crossed the city was an essential transportation waterway connecting the western and eastern parts of the Soviet Union. Hitler also assumed that taking a city that bore the enemy leader's name would be an enormous morale boost for his people and his army.[9]

As the summer war ground on, the constant erratic interventions by Hitler, who overrode his generals' plans, took a toll on German forces. The southern army was instructed to split in two, with one branch moving toward Stalingrad. This created a logistics and supply disaster for an army at war and very far from its home base. In addition, there was the Red Army's determination not to give up, which was best summed up by Stalin's famous order: "Not one step back!" As the fall of 1942 turned into winter, the Germans were drawn to the kind of war they were hoping to avoid: a war of attrition which resembled the stationary trench warfare of World War I. In Stalingrad proper, there were also street-to-street and building-to-building urban fights entirely different from the Blitzkrieg that had characterized the start of the German offensive.

Furthermore, the Wehrmacht was in the grip of a brutal winter for which the German soldiers were poorly equipped and not accustomed.[10] Yet, the common belief that the harsh winter was one of the lead causes to the defeat of the German army in the Soviet Union can be disputed. After all, the German troops had spent the previous winter in the east and winter 1941 was not unusually harsh. It is more likely that poor strategic decisions a result of overextending themselves over a vast battlefield area, coupled with Hitler's chaotic interventions, led to their collapse.[11]

As in the previous winter, public appeals were issued in the Reich for citizens to contribute warm clothing for the fighting men. The losses on both sides were in the hundreds of thousands of military and civilian casualties, and Stalingrad was reduced to rubble and burned under heavy air attacks. As the Red Army regrouped, it began to mount daring attacks, most notably circling Field Marshal Paulus' Sixth Army near Stalingrad, which was severely short-supplied. All attempts to come to the beleaguered army's rescue failed, leading to a large-scale surrender and a huge morale boost for the Red Army. In winter 1943, additional attacks followed with great success against the Germans and their Italian, Hungarian and Romanian allies.[12]

In addition to the convoys of injured soldiers that made their way home, the fierce fighting and materiel losses put a huge strain on German armaments production, which underwent a transformation as a result. From their rise to power in the early 1930s until 1941, arms production accounted for about eight per cent of Germany's total economic output. The rapid victories of the war's early phases saw relatively small materiel losses which did not call for any change of direction. What came to be known as the Blitzkrieg Economy had to be reconsidered following Operation Barbarossa and the losses of the winters of 1942 and 1943.[13]

This reorganization coincided with a leadership change in the Ministry of Armaments and Munition, first established in 1940 under the direction of Fritz Todt, who also oversaw construction of the Reichsautobahn (see chapter 8). Under Todt, the Ministry's responsibility was limited, since the Navy and the Air Force ran their own production facilities. Things changed in February 1942 when, after Todt's death in an air crash, Albert Speer took over. An architect by training, Speer

centralized and rationalized production to properly manage existing resources. Priorities followed the war's emerging situations and guided distribution of raw materials. Innovative, highly productive companies were engaged, and output rose sharply.[14] It was therefore no wonder that in the winter of 1943 Märkisches-Metallformwerk and its forced labour, which had now become essential, were under intense pressure to produce artillery shells and deliver them quickly to the front.

* * *

The men's work at the ammunition factory ended abruptly in August 1943. A woman who cheerfully served them at the dining hall seemed sad. She had heard that they would be leaving the plant the next day. It was hard to comprehend why, with peak demand for ammunition, such dedicated, experienced labourers would now be sent away. Rumours circulated that their experience was needed in another ammunition plant, and that Hitler himself had issued a decree that Jews should not be working in old Reich territory. The group was discouraged. The shift work was exhausting, and they were not permitted to leave the plant's premises, but they were treated reasonably well. They were fed, lodged and had access to medical care when injured.

The official announcement came later that evening. A German foreman told them to get ready for a morning departure. When they went to have their breakfast, the woman in charge of the kitchen's stock room told them that, since they were travelling, in addition to breakfast they were welcome to take food items for the road. Some took loaves of bread, others a can of jam. Chaim was not sure why, but he took a small package of sugar, then joined the 204 men who were lined up in the yard. Deutschland, the man who had welcomed them, came to bid farewell. He gave no reason as to why their work was terminated, where they were headed or what their next assignment would be. He thanked them for their work and said that their devotion did not go unnoticed. He waved a letter that he said he wrote praising their skills, which he planned to give to the accompanying officer who would hand it to the person in charge at their next destination, then he left.

An SS officer approached the group soon after. The tone of the man and his demeanour were different from that of Deutschland. This reminded Chaim of speeches he had heard from SS men before. He began

by praising them for their hard work for the Reich of which he was made aware. He then proceeded to say:

"People, after labouring hard you have earned a well-deserved vacation. You will be taken back to your own country and families and be replaced by another group. I am aware that you have some money which I must collect. Upon arriving to Litzmannstadt, you will receive an equivalent amount in Polish złoty."

When he finished, two soldiers holding small wooden boxes passed between the rows. The men, knowing how important hard currency was to their survival, placed only small change in the boxes. When seeing the small amount gathered, the officer was visibly upset. Brutality was suddenly unleashed. The soldiers selected two men at random, pushed them to the ground and started to beat them mercilessly with their rifle butts. The boxes were passed again, and more money was put in them this time round. Like the rest of the group, Chaim was shocked, reminded of savage violence he had experienced on past occasions, and hoping that it was not a sign of things to come.

It was late morning when the group began marching to the train station. In the warm summer sun, they walked along the roads they had trod upon arrival. Old men and women were seated on benches in the town's square, children chased pigeons, mothers pushed strollers and people came in and out of stores. In the suburbs, under the shade of tall trees, some quietly tended to their gardens. The men's march under guard seemed to be detached from their goings-on.

When the group reached the station, they were ordered to wait. Sadness and fear were visible in their faces. Soon after, when the black locomotive pulled into the station, an additional surprise awaited. There were no passenger cars, just rust-red painted freight cars. Shouting instructions, the SS soldiers ordered them to embark and crowded them in, eighty to a car. There were no windows, just a single small opening covered with barbed wire at the top corner. The car's door was slid shut and closed firmly from outside. There was hardly room to sit, just enough to squeeze onto the floor or stand. The locomotive began moving with its human cargo.