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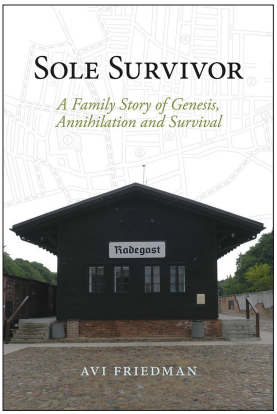

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

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Pinnow Bei Reppen

On April 22, 1940, the six-hundred-man group that Chaim had been forced to join in Litzmannstadt walked to a station from which they were to board a train to their assigned workplace. They knew little about their destination or the type of work they were to perform. For Chaim, it was an unplanned voyage, typical of the fast-moving events in his life since the start of the war. His military training, combat experience and the attempted escape to Russia were each heroic, and in some ways prepared him for the unknown. He deeply regretted his failure to reach home, spend time with his family, learn how they were and tell them the details of his Białystok experience. He comforted himself thinking that at least he got to see his mother and sister.

Arranged in rows and led by representatives of Litzmannstadt City's administration and uniformed policemen, the group walked quietly on snow-covered soil waiting to thaw after the long winter freeze. Chaim carried the small suitcase that he had taken with him to Białystok, to which he added the new clothing his mother had given him. Others carried knapsacks on their backs and parcels in their hands. When they reached the station and were waiting for the train to arrive, the Germans made them run up and down a nearby hill, ridiculing their poor fitness. A second-class train finally pulled into the station and people took their seats.

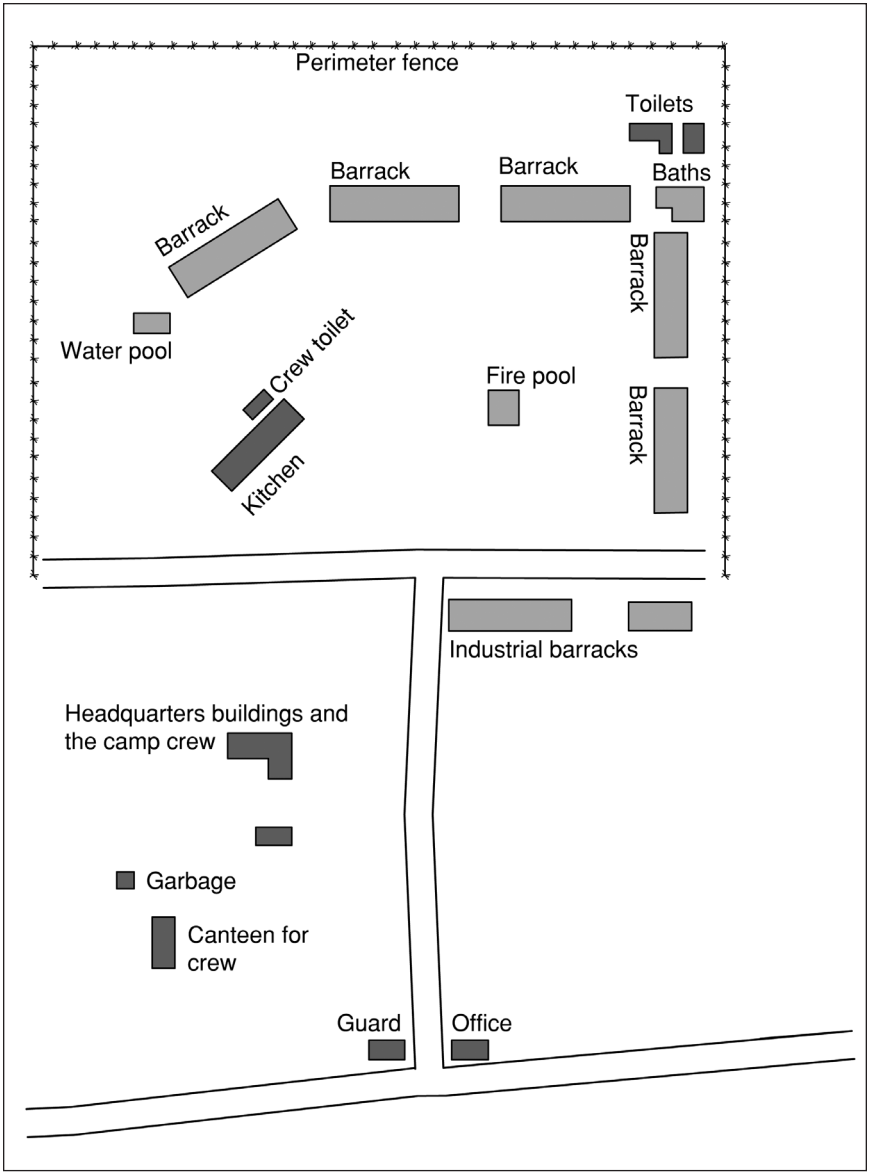
At twenty-two years of age, Chaim was among the youngest in a group that included men as young as sixteen and older ones in their forties. They were sons of migrants to Łódź who grew up in Bałuty, some of whom he knew well. The majority were single and had joined voluntarily, owing to the rapidly deteriorating conditions for Jews, who in April were already confined to an area that was soon to become a

sealed Ghetto. With a long list of Nazi-imposed restrictions, it became clear that their earning opportunities were eliminated. Some, like Chaim, were accused of and sentenced to serve time for offences like trying to escape Litzmannstadt, attempting to reach someone in the city or smuggling. Others left wives and children to whom they were permitted to send earnings.

The group was told that they would be working for the Reich and as such be entitled to the same wages and social benefits as German citizens got, and that, in their place of work, they would be lodged and fed.[1] The Judenrat announced the work program as a privileged opportunity for which men were to be chosen. Interested people were asked to submit to a medical exam to determine their fitness. Some forty per cent of the applicants were rejected following examination by Jewish doctors, and a further seven per cent were disqualified by German physicians in a second exam.[2] Chaim did not submit to these exams since he had been sent as a young prisoner in good health.

On the train, speculation mounted about the work assignment and its location. Some suggested that they would be assigned to farms or factories, replacing German men who had been drafted into the army. Among them were some Polish-born Jews who had immigrated to Germany for work during World War I and were forced out when the Nazis took power. They knew the land and said that they were in the annexed territories around the city of Breslau (Wrocław), near the town of Reppen (Rzepin).

After a nighttime voyage, the train reached the Torzym station, where a row of trucks waited. At the station they were split into two groups of three hundred and boarded trucks that took each group to a different destination. After a short drive on country roads, passing village homes and through a forested area, Chaim's group arrived at a snow-covered clearing where, in the early misty morning, they saw a camp and a sign that read Pinnow Bei Reppen. At the rear there were six single-storey wooden structures arranged in a semicircle to enclose a yard. Four of the buildings looked made for living, with a row of glazed windows on either side; one had a sign that read kitchen/dining, another was for showers and toilets, and the last was a tool-storage shed. In the front section of the camp, distinguished from the rear, there was a barrack that housed the supervising crew, next to which



8.1 A site plan of a typical work camp along the planned Reichsautobahn route.

there was another structure for the supervisors' kitchen. The place was encircled by a barbed-wire fence with no tall light posts or guard towers, but which met at a gate near two small cabins for the guards' accommodation.[3]

When the group disembarked, a man arrived and made them stand in rows. They were divided into groups and assigned to one of the barracks. Each barrack's interior had two long rows of double bunk beds with straw mattresses, two blankets and a pillow on each. A towel and a set of tables were also ready for them. In the centre there was a wooden heater with a long pipe that extended to the outside, and logs were piled nearby. The space also had a sink, table, a few chairs and several lockers.

* * *

The group that left Litzmannstadt was assigned to work on the Reichsautobahn (RAB) road network, a monumental undertaking that was put in place after the Nazis rose to power in 1933. Initiated as a work program during Germany's Great Depression, it was meant to engage some of the six million unemployed labourers and to boost tourism in the country. Its vision, attributed to Hitler, was drafted and implemented by Dr. Fritz Todt, the Inspector General for the German Road System, who in 1940 was appointed Minister of Armament and Ammunition. The project was said to be part of the Fuhrer's megalomaniac "Thousand Year Reich" idea of connecting Berlin with Moscow once Russia's eastern territories were conquered.[4] There was also a strategic military objective: the fast movement of troops and materiel, while avoiding passage through the narrow streets in old cities' cores.[5] Other lofty social ideals included encouraging people to visit and enjoy the Reich's countryside and moving citizens from crowded cities to suburban garden towns.[6] To reach these places, Germans would travel on comfortable roads in a car of their own. The "motorization of the masses" was part of it and saw the development of the Volkswagen that working families would be able to afford.[7]

The work on the Reichsautobahn began in 1934 and proceeded along several routes. The first to be inaugurated, in 1935, was between Frankfurt and Darmstadt, with several more sections linking cities to be finished progressively. Hitler's idea was to make it a purely German-built project, yet as the economy roared back to life starting in the

mid-1930s and as higher-paying jobs were made available elsewhere, there were labour shortages.[8] As a result, German Jews and other nationals who were barred from many employment opportunities were forced to work on these projects.[9]

The roads were a marvel of design and engineering. The concrete-surfaced highway was made up of two lanes in each direction divided by a median. Intersections were avoided and overpasses constructed over rivers, rail lines and ravines that rarely exceeded slopes of eight per cent to ensure a smooth ride. Cloverleaf interchanges allowed fast entry to and exit from the road. Paying attention to landscaping along the route was an important planning consideration ,and keeping natural objects such as forests and hills intact around which the roads split was pivotal in ensuring travellers' visual enjoyment.[10]

As for the project's management, the work on each highway was broken into sections. Each had a work camp to house supervising staff and labourers, consisting of a number of barracks and utility structures. When completed, the autobahn sections would connect with one another to make a continuous road, and the work camps were dismantled.[11]

In mid-1940, Arthur Greiser, the Wartheland Governor, proudly announced to journalists that he had received permission from the Reichsautobahn (RAB) directorate to build a one hundred and seventy-kilometre link between Frankfurt an der Oder and Posen (Poznań), where his headquarters were located. In addition to the many benefits that the road would bring to the region, it would provide work to Litzmannstadt's unemployed Jews who had just been forced into an area of their own. The responsibility to find able people for work was assigned to the Judenrat.[12] Chaim was among the first groups to be sent.

* * *

Shortly after the men settled into the barracks, they were called out and made to stand in rows in the central area. Minutes later the Lagerältester (the head of the camp) appeared. A well-dressed, tall man with a pocket-watch chain in his vest, he surveyed the group and then walked between the rows inspecting each person. When he finished, he could be heard saying to those accompanying him that "these people were not made for a hard work." When asked to state their occupations,

8.2 The Frankfurt an der Oder to Posen (Poznań) Autobahn project was divided into thirty-seven segments spaced about 4.5 kilometres apart, each with its own work camp as shown on this model.

there were butchers, bakers, cooks and merchants, but very few with labour-intensive, construction-related work experience. Chaim stated that he did not have a profession. The Lageräl tester than proceeded to describe the work that they would perform, and their obligations, benefits and daily routine. He explained that, since the soil was still frozen, they would have to wait a while until conditions changed. There was not much to do but wait and get to know each other.

The Frankfurt an der Oder to Posen (Poznań) Autobahn project was divided into thirty-seven segments spaced about four and a half kilometres apart, each with its own work camp. The work camps were similar in plan with places to house workers and store tools. The route meandered between dense forests and villages for the shortest

connection between destinations. Working conditions and the attitude to workers depended on the Lagerältester. Some were mean and even cruel to the Jewish labourers who were assigned to their camps. There were beatings by the supervisors, and starvation, poor living conditions, and public hanging for an attempted escape was common. Other heads of camps did not hold deep Nazi beliefs and treated the workers humanely. In Pinnow Bei Reppen camp, Chaim's group was among the lucky ones.

The ten-hour workday began at dawn with a wash and a breakfast that included bread, margarine, jam and coffee. Then, in rows of three, the men walked for one to two hours to the work site. There was a short lunch break with no bread or only a small amount. The day ended at dusk with a walk back, a washup, dinner in the common dining room and then sleep. Sunday was set aside for rest but with no permission to leave the camp, which was watched by uniformed civil guards. Letting the men visit the families they had left back in Litzmannstadt was not even considered.

The work was gruelling. The main construction tasks were performed by heavy machinery, but there was plenty of hard manual labour accompanying it. A narrow-gauge rail line was laid parallel to the route into which rocks, soil and mud were placed by hand into cars which were pushed to a dumping area. Ditches had to be dug so that swampy areas were drained. Then, the ground had to be perfectly levelled with hand tools and readied for the next stage. Enormous pressure was put on the contracting company by the Inspector General's office to complete the assigned section according to schedule. As a result, workers did not take any time to pause on hot, rainy or cold days. In spring and summer, mosquito bites were plentiful. There was no way to escape the watchful eye of the supervising staff and the guards.

Promises that were given early on about wages, labour conditions and social benefits were soon found to be false. Deductions were taken for food and what was called "camp maintenance," which included all the lodging-associated costs like electricity. Some eighty per cent of the wages were transferred to the Ghetto's Judenrat for supplying the workers. A portion of this was then given to the married workers' families who were left behind. Other amounts were set aside to cover sickness and injury costs, leaving in the workers' hands a very small

8.3 Forced labourers digging in a water-filled trench along the Reichsautobahn route.

compensation for the hard labour they performed. What was described initially as a work program turned out to be forced labour from which the men had no way out.[13]

To encourage people in the now-sealed Ghetto to sign on to the work program voluntarily, and as part of the deception, the men in Pinnow Bei Reppen were each asked to send a postcard in German to their families. They were encouraged to describe their "favourable" working conditions and benefits. A few weeks after Chaim sent his, he got a letter from his brother Yossel, also written in German. After not hearing from him for some time, the card said that they were grateful and praised God that he was alive. He learnt that his sister Manya and her husband, David Gmach, had welcomed into the world a boy, whom they named Abram Icchok, and that Hela and Dydie Kane had a son

whom they named Faleg. He wondered about the life that the newborns, whom he wanted to meet, would have under the circumstances, and how they were doing in the Ghetto that he learned had been established. The letter mentioned nothing about the passing of his father in October. The small touch of home life carried by a letter which he read many times over kept him going during difficult times. There was so much more that he wanted to know but could not.

Days seemed to pass rapidly, as they were kept to a demanding schedule and routine. From their time of arrival in early spring 1940, a great deal of preparatory work was accomplished in the Reichsautobahn section to which Chaim's group was assigned. Forested areas were cleared, soil levelled and supporting concrete structures were erected in advance of the road paving. Yet, rapidly evolving events were about to change the course of the project, and of the men's work and life.

* * *

On June 22, 1941, the Germans and their allies launched Operation Barbarossa and invaded the Soviet Union. In an attack that resembled the Blitzkrieg conquest of Poland twenty-two months earlier, Germany directed its might at its former ally suddenly to catch the Red Army off guard. The war's aim, as stated by Hitler, was to create more "Living Space" for the German nation by taking over Russia's European territories. What Hitler eyed were the vast, rich fertile lands needed to feed his people, the oil reserves of the Caucasus to fuel the war machine and forced labour to man factories and build grandiose projects. The invasion was also in line with the Nazi ideology of freeing Europe of Bolsheviks and Jews and enslaving Slavs.[14]

With Western Europe already fallen, most of the mighty German army crossed the twenty-nine-hundred-kilometre-long Soviet border in three main axes. The troops included more than three million men equipped with tens of thousands of motorized vehicles and three thousand tanks, with air cover provided by thousands of airplanes that reduced strategic installations and cities to rubble. As the Red Army capitulated at the start of the operation, some five million troops were encircled and surrendered to become slave labour; many were eventually starved or gassed to death.[15] It was one of the largest offensives in military history, characterized by unparalleled brutality, which

especially targeted Jews. The notorious Einsatzgruppen rounded them up in ghettos, killed them in forests or sent them to death camps.

The early phases of the operation were a resounding German success, with territories and cities rapidly falling to the attacker's hands, bringing the troops to the gates of Moscow and other major cities. Things changed once the Red Army recovered and began to put up more resistance. A chain of logistical and intelligence errors by the Germans failed to recognize Russia's endurance, its capacity to move essential factories to the hinterland, the vulnerability of their own long supply lines and the effect of an unforgiving winter. The battles that ensued over months and years saw Germany retreat amid huge losses. The prolonged war exacted a heavy toll on the German economy and necessitated the diversion of many resources and people to the war effort.[16]

In early fall 1941, the men at Pinnow Bei Reppen were hard at work, hurrying to keep ahead of the fast-approaching winter. A few months later, as the snow fell the ground began to freeze, work came to a crawl and then halted. On occasion, the men were engaged in snow clearing and odd maintenance jobs, but there was little more to do. From the camp's civilian personnel, they learnt about the offensive in the East, not knowing how it would affect them.

In late 1941, a decision was made in Berlin to bring to a halt the Reichsautobahn construction. The causes were a lack of funding, a need for the heavy machinery in other locations and the emergence of other priorities as a result of the war. There was a plan to link Berlin to Moscow with a rail line once Russian lands were conquered, which would supply the fighting troops with much-needed materials. The work of the past months on the Frankfurt an der Oder to Posen autobahn was abandoned, leaving behind long stretches of cleared forests and just-built concrete structures to stand orphaned in the landscape. It also left a group of men with an uncertain future.[17]