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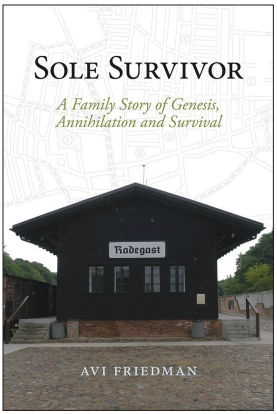

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

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Gleiwitz

In summer and fall of 1944, Chaim was one of thirty-five thousand forced labourers at the Monowitz camp. Rapidly evolving circumstances changed IG Farben's building plans. The site, judged to be strategic to the German war effort, was the target of Allied air raids, and some of the prisoners' time was devoted to damage repair. Changes of mood among the SS troops made them resort to even greater brutality than usual. The small food rations were cut further, and items that occasionally supplemented the evening meal, like a slice of sausage, were no longer given. Learning about military events from the plant's civilian employees, Chaim hoped that he might be freed soon.

In the preceding months, Germany had fought relentlessly on several fronts. It was the kind of war that Hitler tried to avoid in 1939 when Britain and France threatened a western attack during Poland's invasion, but the Red Army came to the rescue by opening an eastern front against Poland. This time, the opposite occurred. The Blitzkrieg that the Wehrmacht launched against the Soviet Union in 1941 and in spring 1942 with hopes of a quick victory failed to produce that result. Starting in winter 1942, the two armies were engaged in a war in which Germany was on the losing end.

Stretching hundreds of kilometres, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Caucasus in the south, the Soviets progressively recovered their lost territories, freed Leningrad from its merciless siege, and in summer 1944 were militarily present on prewar Polish territories. As was the case throughout the war, Hitler had overridden his generals and kept replacing them when things did not go his way.

At the start of 1944, German military leaders still thought that they could win the war. By the end of the year, very few believed that

this would be the case. War raged on all fronts, and Hitler's prediction that, if the Germans were to lose the war, they would bring down with them "the world in flame" seem to materialize. The German fighting force was made up of exhausted and demoralized soldiers, many accepting their fate that they might soon die. But the fear of falling captive to the Red Army and knowing that they were the last line of their Motherland's defence against invasion and the retributions that would surely follow, made them mount a stubbornly fierce fight. This slowed the Red Army's movement somewhat.[1] But by the end of 1944, the Red Army was on the banks of the Vistula River, within reach of the Auschwitz complex of camps.

Germany did not do better on other fronts. The Allies started to encroach on German-held European territories and those under its sphere of influence in July 1943, with their invasion of Sicily. The landing on Italy's mainland, the collapse of Mussolini's fascist regime and the hard-fought warfare that followed achieved a key strategic goal: forcing a withdrawal of German troops from the Eastern Front and weakening its defences there. It also offered the Allies airfields in Italy from which they could launch attacks on cities and military installations in southern Germany.[2]

The war in Italy unfolded parallel to the massive Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Normandy which began on June 6, 1944. What came to be known as D-Day saw some one hundred and fifty thousand troops brought ashore by thousands of vessels under massive aircover. The Allies started to make their way through France, then liberated Belgium and Holland to open a western front. In battles that lasted several months, the Wehrmacht was pushed back. By late 1944 the war had reached Reich territory.[3]

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The grave threat posed by the advancing Red Army necessitated an immediate decision by Himmler and his deputy Pohl about the killing centres, concentration camps and forced-labour camps on former Polish soil. From a small beginning, over the war years the main camps and the subcamps had grown to become a huge network that by January 1945 imprisoned approximately seven hundred fifteen thousand inmates, including POWs, supporting German civilian enterprises and

the war effort.[4] The Nazi doctrine of annihilation through work turned these places into killing centres unto themselves. Abandoning it all and freeing people was ruled out. The places and the inmates were incriminating evidence of the enormous crime that was being committed against humanity. There was also the thought that Germany might be able to hold off the advancing enemies along its old borders, in which case the labourers could still be exploited.

Himmler, rumoured to have started his own negotiation with the Allies, contemplated the idea that the prisoners could be used as a bargaining chip in a future surrender agreement.[5] A decision, therefore, was made to move prisoners in camps that were within the Red Army's immediate reach to the annexed Wartheland territories as a first step; and if further advances came afterwards, to the old Reich. Not leaving behind a single able body and destroying and erasing their killing infrastructure such as gas chambers and crematoria was initiated by the heads of the SS and supported by Hitler.[6]

Regardless of the motives, the logistics of mobilizing hundreds of thousands of men and women by foot or train in a relatively short time was overwhelming. As in the case of Auschwitz complex, most of the train tracks leading to the camps were already taken by the Red Army. The solution found was to reach "safe" transit points by foot and from there travel by train to Germany. What occurred in the months that followed was far from the disciplined action and the rational decision-making process that the SS was known for. Hasty, chaotic and often conflicting instructions were handed down from Berlin. The broad orders to regional subordinates included departure dates and destinations but left many of the details to camps' commanders, and even to the guards in charge of the march, to decide.

Starting in April 1944 with the evacuation of the Majdanek concentration camp and continuing through the spring and summer of that year, tens of thousand of prisoners were on the move. They were mobilized from camps in Yugoslavia, Hungary and all other territories that were about to fall into the Red Army's hands. Reaching new, unimaginable levels of horror and brutality, these would become known as the Death Marches. The nature of the crime scenes also changed. Whereas past atrocities took place in the camps' seclusion behind barbed wire and far from the watchful eyes of citizens, the marches passed through

or near towns and villages for all to witness. The public become passive and at times active participants in the crimes committed. Those guarding the marches were not only trained German SS soldiers but also fanatical Nazi recruits, including party and local militias members, and youth movement members who joined to assist in the events. The professional guards were foreigners and included Ukrainians, Romanians, Hungarians and Latvians. These wore uniforms, had rifles, were given sketchy orders and in most cases acted on their own sadistic one-shot impulses.[7]

* * *

The temperatures hovered below the freezing mark on the morning of January 18, 1945. Standing at attention on the snow-covered roll-call square and organized into their Kommando units, the men of Monowitz were preparing for a hastily called departure. A faint sound of exploding shells could be heard in the distance. Dressed in striped clothing hardly made to withstand the cold weather, they looked like a ragtag army. The accumulated fatigue, a result of working with little food in the previous cold months, was visible on their bewildered faces and starved bodies. Those hoping for an end to the war and their misery had their hopes dashed. The only prisoners left behind were the infirmary's very sick who were judged to be too ill to walk and were assumed to only be able to last a few days with no care or food.[8]

The previous night, the barrack's elder announced their departure and instructed them to get ready. In addition to soup, the evening meal included a double-sized portion of bread and some canned food that they were told needed to last a few days until they reached their new destination.[9] While others chose to eat it all at once, Chaim cut the bread and saved half of it for later. Weeks earlier, through trading, he had managed to get an old backpack in which he stuffed a few belongings, and in the morning he wrapped a blanket around it. Under his striped overcoat he wore his cement-bag undergarment on top of which he placed a sweater that he had also traded for. As he did every evening, he paid special attention to his feet, wrapping them in cloth.

The morning head count proceeded as usual. Then, several Kommandos were instructed to merge into a single group. With men from different barracks and a variety of nationalities, of which the

majority were Jews, the group numbered approximately two thousand. It included his band of friends with whom he had left Litzmannstadt in spring 1940. They could count on each other's support. An SS officer stood on a stage and made a short speech.

"People," he announced with the by now familiar speech, "you will be taken to a place for a new work assignment where better living conditions and food are waiting."

Knowing that he was being lied to, Chaim noticed that, as with his other voyages, the destination was left out. No reason was given for the hasty departure, but it was clear that the Germans were on the run. A group of about twenty-five armed SS guards took position at the front, rear and side of the column. One of them, a higher-ranking soldier who seemed to be in charge, gave a marching order and they walked in unison toward, then exited by, the gate. They walked in deep snow on country roads near fields waiting for spring to arrive, and through forests with bare tree branches. Village homes and odd large brick-clad buildings used as barns and for storage were also visible. Leaving behind the grim camp and the construction site, the early part of the walk resembled the short one that they took daily to the plant. Feeling relief that he had left a place where his life could have ended on a whim, Chaim worried still about the unknown.

Cold, fatigue and hunger began to take their toll later that morning. For some, their poor clothing hardly offered the protection needed in the below-freezing temperatures, and the wooden clogs that many wore meant snow stuck to their soles, making walking highly difficult. There were no pauses. The need to deliver the prisoners on time coupled with the fact that the Red Army might not be far behind kept the guards shouting commands to hurry up. The column included infirmary patients clearly too weak to walk, who feared that staying in the camp would result in their execution. At the back of the column a few men were pushing a cart on which the personal belongings of the SS guards were loaded.

Several hours into the walk, the dire need of some to rest was evident. Among those to slow down first were gaunt, newly arrived prisoners, or the poorly dressed. As their weak bodies failed to obey their minds, they began to stray from the column while others were passing them, and then they collapsed. When a guard approached them, they

begged on their knees for a few minutes of rest to gather their strength. The guard shouted at them to get back on their feet. When there was no response, he calmly pointed his rifle to their skull and shot, leaving their bleeding body on the roadside. Shots could often be heard from the rear as the column relentlessly marched on. Hearing the shots and seeing people left behind for dead, Chaim knew that a new level of brutality and suffering was about to mark this chapter of his ordeal. This was his ultimate struggle to survive. If the Germans had seen a value in his life, he had thought, it was because of the hard slave labour he performed. It did not seem that way now. They were on the run to an unknown destination, perhaps a killing place.

At midday the marchers reached and crossed a village near the town of Bierun where farmers peered at the column from windows. They stopped in a snow-covered field for a rest and toilet needs. No food or water was given. Some dug into the frozen soil, hoping to find a potato left from the previous summer's harvest. Chaim ate a portion of the bread he got the night before and shoved a handful of snow into his mouth and rubbed his face with more. The feet of those walking in wooden clogs were covered with blisters and sores. After an hour they were ordered to continue. A few could no longer stand and remained seated in place. From farther ahead, Chaim could hear the gunshot sounds.

By nightfall they were directed to an off-the-road farmhouse near the town of Tychy.[10] A peasant stepped out and exchanged words with the guards. The men were led to a barn with straw-covered ground but clearly too small to contain them all. The guards shouted to enter. The men were told that any attempt to escape would be punished by death. No one doubted it. Squeezed between others while some stood, Chaim managed to find a sitting spot. He paid the most attention he could to his sore feet and tried to get some sleep. With no food or water, shivering, he waited for the night to pass.

When the day broke and the barn's door opened, a few people lay dead. Some prisoners approached the lifeless bodies, calmly removing clothing or searching pockets for food and valuables. The men were ordered to arrange themselves in a column. No food or water was given, and the march resumed on another freezing day. Much like the previous day, occasional gunshots could be heard when a marcher gave

13.1 Prisoners who were evacuated from one of the camps near Dachau on a death march.

up and fell behind. In the blowing snow no one bothered to turn his head. To lighten their load, the very weak marchers got rid of various belongings, some even of their blankets, further exposing their bodies to the cold. At midday there was a stop on the edge of Mikolow, where Chaim ate his remaining bread and then went back to marching. The men walked quietly, snow stuck to their faces, among them brothers and at times fathers and sons, not letting each other fall to their knees.[11]

By nightfall in the flickering lights of a village the march halted, and they were directed to a large shed where they were made to spend the night. Chaim and a close friend contemplated escape but soon abandoned the idea. Running weakly in striped clothing and with no food on snow-covered soil in a hostile place that they hardly knew – one where Jews were hunted – did not seem to make sense. More dead

lay on the shed's ground in the morning. Some were awake but could not or refused to stand and join the group, accepting their fate. Sounds of a machine gun could be heard when the guards made their sweep to verify that no one was left behind.

They walked past long convoys of fleeing ethnic German civilians, who had migrated to these areas when promised free farms at the start of the war. Old people and children wrapped in blankets were seated on horse-drawn wagons full of belongings, while others walked nearby pushing carts. There was an expression of hostility in their faces, as if the marchers were their tormenters. It reminded Chaim of the convoys of Poles whose homes were destroyed, fleeing from the advancing German army and the attacking airplanes at the start of the war.

By midday, the rural landscape turned urban and taller buildings could be spotted in the distance. A passerby told the marchers that they were approaching Gleiwitz (Gliwice in Polish). The city of one hundred and twenty thousand in prewar Germany was known in Upper Silesia for its tall wooden radio tower. An attack staged by the SS on its broadcast station gave Hitler an excuse to start the war.[12] Located some fifty-five kilometres from Auschwitz – the distance that the marchers walked in the past two and a half days – it was an important rail hub.[13] Its location prompted the SS to build several smaller forced-labour subcamps under Auschwitz command, where prisoners were engaged in rail-car repair and roadbuilding. Guarded by a fence and watchtowers, each of Gleiwitz's small camps was planned to house a few hundred labourers in fewer than ten barracks.[14] Being near a rail junction made these camps a transit point for the marching prisoners, most from Auschwitz, to different camps in Germany.

After their ordeal by walking, the marching group's number dwindled by one third to about fourteen hundred. Their entry into one of Gleiwitz's camps was far from the orderly process that had characterized their arrival at other places. It was a scene of chaos, crowded with thousands of marchers who had arrived earlier. The guards left them in the middle of the small roll-call square, and it was for them to find a place in one of the barracks that looked like the ones they had left in Buna. Knowing that a night stay outdoors might spell their death, they all rushed into one of the barracks. With many trying to force their way in, a riot erupted, and the door was torn apart off its hinges.[15] Chaim

was lucky to enter. A place that was designed to house two hundred people on three-level bunkbeds now contained several times that many, with people lying on top of one another. Chaim crawled under the lower-level bunk, resting from what he had just been through and waiting for the morning. When day broke, some people lay dead indoors and the frozen corpses of those left outside covered the yard. No one paid much attention. When hunger hit, Chaim stepped out in search of food and got imitation coffee in one of the barracks.

There was little to do in the Gleiwitz camp but wait. With constant departures, some room was freed in the barracks around which people from different nationalities clustered. In the evening watery soup and a small piece of bread were given out. Watching groups leaving the camp, Chaim waited for his turn. Days later, the numbers of his and other Kommandos that left Monowitz together on January 18 were called. Since their numbers had shrunk, members of other groups were added. Hungry and exhausted, he stood with his backpack and blanket in a column listening to a speech by an SS man that, as usual, said nothing about their destination. Larger-than-usual portions of bread were given to each, then they began marching and exited through the gate.