

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

by Avi Friedman

ISBN 978-1-77385-694-0

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

Epilogue

Chaim and Dina's boat arrived at the Port of Haifa on a hot September day in 1948. In common with many immigrants who arrived on the shores of the newly established State of Israel, their early years were full of hardship. They spent their first few days in an immigrant camp, then moved in with members of Dina's family, after which they rented a room that was tacked to the back of an existing single-family home in a town called Petach Tikva. My older sister was born there, as was I a few years afterwards. We were named after our father's parents. Some years later, we moved into a tiny apartment in a new neighbourhood on the edge of the same town. Most of our neighbours, like our parents, came from elsewhere and had their own stories to tell. After a decade we moved to the heart of Tel Aviv, Israel's largest city. Months after arriving in Israel, Chaim was drafted into the newly established Israel Defence Force, which had just emerged from the War of Independence. He then joined the Penitentiary Service where he worked for twenty-seven years in different capacities until his retirement. Dina was a homemaker.

Even though my sister and I grew up in the shadow of the Shoah (Holocaust), it had a low presence in our home. It was nonetheless always in the background and rose to the surface on Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) or on the days when my father went to the synagogue to pray Kaddish for his lost family. The need to cope with day-to-day life's events made Chaim and Dina compartmentalize their past. They did whatever they could to put aside their horrific memories, shelter us from their experiences and give us a normal upbringing. Only when asked would they share with us some of their stories. In later years, they began to open up and tell us more. As a child, I recall sitting in our tiny kitchen listening to my father's war experiences. When he reached a

point in the story that in my mother's view a child should not hear, she asked him to stop.

A memorable event in my father's confrontation of his past took place during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat who was responsible for the deportation of Jews from many European countries to the killing centres. Captured in Argentina in 1961, he was put on trial in Israel. I recall my father sitting every evening near our old radio listening to the day's summaries of riveting testimonies, many of them in Yiddish. Hearing the witnesses tell their story reminded him of scenes he had seen and took him to places he had been, and where his family members found their tragic end. He was visibly deeply moved.

Despite my parents' effort to shelter us from their past, from a young age I was aware of what they had been through. I did my best not to bother them with my own growing up and personal concerns, be it challenges in school or my military service. When my father and I carried on a conversation about his experiences it was often about the details. I was intrigued and eager to know how it felt to be in a cattle car, lining up in the latrines in the mornings and seeing those who hanged themselves during the night, the brutally cold winters, and mastering his trading skills. Our conversations were instrumental to the writing of this book.

What I could not fully understand, and probably never will, was what made Chaim not give up when so many did. What drove his will to live? Often, including during my site visits and the writing of this book, I asked myself, how he did survive the hard labour, beatings and starvation of Kreuzsee Bei Reppen and Mankowitz and the walks and train rides in open carts in below-freezing temperatures during the death march when so many perished? My mind often drifted to reflecting what I would have done in such situations, and if I would have given up. In our many conversations he kept saying that he always thought about a better tomorrow. That somehow, this nightmare would end, and he would reunite with his family, or at the very least some of them, to resume his life. Knowing him, I counted his self-discipline, drive and wisdom among the elements that kept him alive.

Unlike our peers, my sister and I did not have close relatives from our father's side. Our grandparents, uncles, aunts and first cousins had all perished. Not even a photograph of them remained. The Frydman

and the Jutrzenka families who had lived in the towns of Pińczów and Chmielnik perished in ghettos or were deported to the Treblinka death camp where they met their tragic end. It was an uncommon way of growing up. When I ask my father how he felt when he found out that he alone remained, he said that many of his survivors' friends got the same news, so he did not feel much different. And then he said that one cannot fight destiny. In our conversations he often shared with me his recollections of the character of his parents and siblings. It made it sound as if they were still alive. He dwelt on his desire to be secular to his father's dislike and his admiration of his mother who kept the family united in good times.

My mother had her own stories to tell. Being deported to Auschwitz late in the war in August 1944 she naturally did not experience the full brunt of what my father did, but she also came close to dying on several occasions and survived a death march. But she understood my father. She witnessed firsthand what he had been through. Their relationship was one of a mutual support between two people who have been to Hell and were fortunate to come back.

Chaim and Dina had five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Chaim died in 2005 and Dina in 2007. They did not set foot on European soil again.

* * *

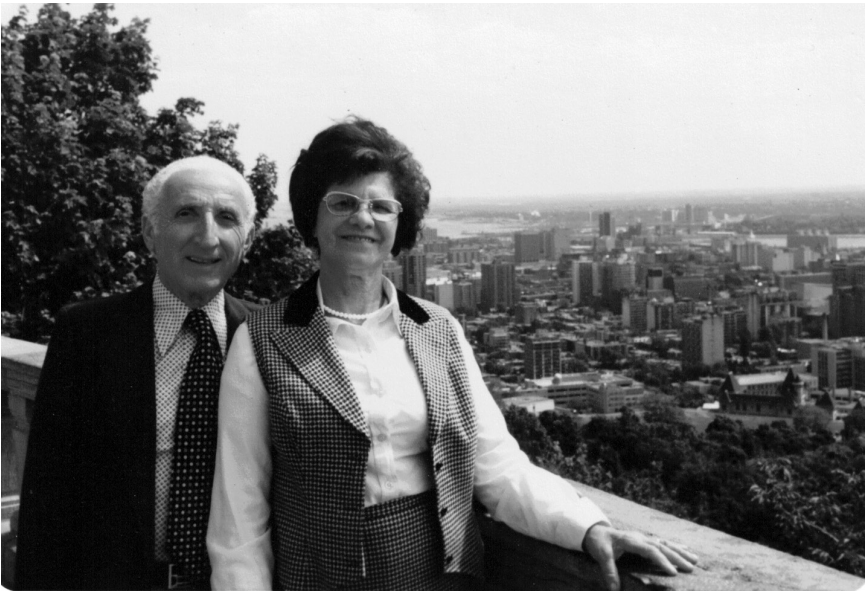
In many ways writing this book brought me closer to my late father. His wartime story revealed personality facets that I was unaware of, enabling me to view his postwar life in a new light. Like every Israeli man and woman, I was drafted to the army at the age of eighteen. For three years I was mostly away from home. When my duty ended, I began studies in distant cities and continued in Canada where I eventually settled. As a result, I did not spend much time as an adult in deep conversation with my father about his experiences during the war years. During my home visits we only talked sporadically about the past. The writing of this book and the work that preceded it, to some degree, was a one-sided conversation with Chaim. While writing, on many occasions I wished I only had a few minutes of his time and deeply regretted not spending more time with him when I could.

I began my writing by revisiting and transcribing an interview I had recorded with Chaim in 1995. He was an amazing storyteller. He remembered and could describe a place's smallest details and an event's main actors, which enabled me to bring it to life and construct a proper backstage to the main narrative. I supplemented many of my father's descriptions with documents I traced in archives and interviews with others. It gradually helped me fill voids and build the portrait of the Frydman family I never knew, yet very much wanted to be part of. I kept imagining my father surrounded by his parents, sisters and brothers, a side of him that I sadly never witnessed.

Time and again I wondered whether my father's experience shaped me. It did. In retrospect, I think that it made me resilient and clearly more aware and sensitive to other people's suffering. Along the stations of my life when I faced challenge or adversity, my thoughts often drifted to episodes in Chaim's wartime life and the actions he took in them. I recall walking on one bitterly cold Canadian winter day, wondering where Chaim found the strength to survive the fifty-kilometre death march from Auschwitz III to the camp in Gleiwitz with no food and proper clothing. My own hardship then dwindled to insignificance.

I derived another of my life lessons from my father, when I kept thinking about the core virtue that sustain his survival: self-discipline. He had to practice extreme discipline in all the stations of his ordeal. Maintaining daily personal hygiene in very harsh conditions, rationing the small amount of food he got, not smoking his cigarettes but trading them for clothing that kept him warm and saved his life. I believe this virtue rubbed off on me. Throughout my military service and my own academic career, I drew inspiration from Chaim's conduct.

As I delved deeper into my research, following establishment of a list of places that my father has been to and the time he spent in each, I decided to see them for myself. I felt that, despite the decades that had passed, visiting them would complement my understanding of Chaim's experience. As an architect, I knew that relating to places become real when one "walks the site." I went on to construct a chronological timeline and geographical path of the Frydman family and Chaim. A month-long summer trip with my son began in a small Polish town and ended up in Chaim's place of liberation. Visiting apartments they lived in, killing sites and camps, the death march route and cities he went to

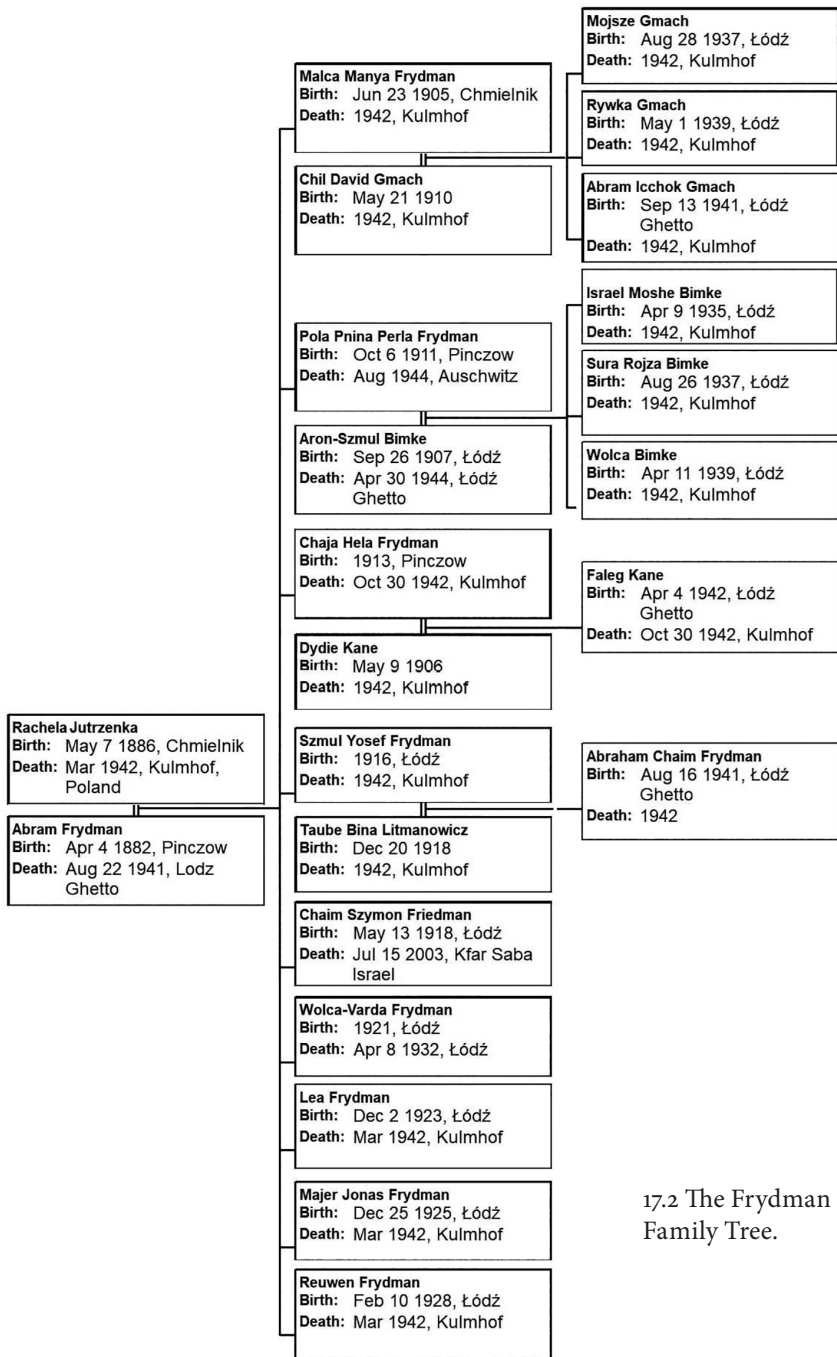


17.1 Dina and Chaim on a visit to Montreal c. 1994.

when freed, was remarkable. I deeply regretted not having taken this trip with him when he was alive. He was nonetheless there with me in voice and spirit. In each location we played a recorded clip in which he recalled the place and the event that took place. This made for a highly moving experience. A memorable spot was the recorded description of his arrival to the Birkenau killing centre when the train doors opened at the gates of Hell.

An aspect that kept puzzling me was Chaim's ability to go on after finding that he remained alone. Many Holocaust survivors I had met often had at least some family member who had also survived. A parent, brother or sister who formed a support system that helped them start anew. In addition, among many survivors there was often a feeling of guilt that they made it alive. My father never displayed such feelings. As for myself, it helped me form a close relationship with my sister with whom I speak very often. What I dearly miss is not having a larger family on my father's side with whom I could have celebrated holidays and personal milestones.

What remained in my mind is the brutality that Chaim and the Frydmans and for that matter all Holocaust victims endured. Some images are hard to let go. Chaim's naked circle walk on a winter day during the work selection in the Kreuzsee Bei Reppen camp. Sitting among dead corpses during his long train ride in below freezing temperatures in an open car. My naked cousins, some nine months old, clinging to their naked parents in a gas van as they took their last breath. These are some of the images that will forever be etched in my mind.



17.2 The Frydman Family Tree.

