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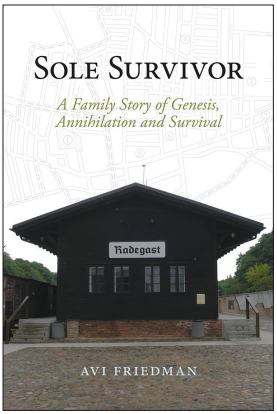

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

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Modena, Adriatica and Trani

Chaim's life was at a crossroads. He did not want to remain in Germany, a country that had murdered his family and nearly killed him. After what he had learned, returning to Poland, which harboured strong anti-Semitic sentiments, was not an option either. Entry visas to nations across the ocean were not being issued. He needed to find a place to live until he decided where to settle. A friend in Traunstein told the group about a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Italy where his surviving brother was staying and said that he was headed there. Having few alternatives, the others decided to join their colleague.

In the aftermath of the war, crossing borders was easy. Not having formal travel documents or entry visas to Italy did not seem to pose a problem. For one, the survivors' passport was the number tattooed on their arms, which helped them declare who they were. In addition, the illicit fabrication of all sorts of easy-to-obtain documents flourished. Members of the Jewish Brigade, made up of Israelis who joined the British forces in fighting the Nazis, also helped refugees travel. Italian border agents commonly turned a blind eye to the illegal entry of Jewish refugees into the country, knowing that most would only stay until they could get an entry visa to another nation.[1] In addition, refugees rarely paid for bus or train rides, simply stating that the war left them penniless.[2] In July 1945, Chaim bade farewell to a part of Europe that inflicted pain on him and headed south to begin a new chapter in his life.

* * *

DP camps were established primarily in defeated nations such as Germany, Austria and Italy to serve as temporary housing facilities for

refugees, who numbered in the millions. The refugees included liberated prisoners, those expelled from territories through acts of ethnic cleansing and even those who refused to return home due to a fear of retribution for collaboration with the Nazis.[3] The camps were located at both former Nazi concentration camps and at military installations and were run by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). It cared for the occupants' immediate needs. In many cases the military forces who controlled these zones also provided logistic support and security.[4]

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the same camps housed people of different faiths and nationalities. At times, former Nazi sympathizers who had disguised their identity lived side by side with survivors. This caused frictions and often acts of revenge. Following a report by Earl Harrison, U.S. president Truman's envoy to the camps, who voiced concerns about rising anti-Semitism and the poor living conditions, a separate network of camps for Jewish DPs was established until solutions to their plight could be found.[5] Finding a permanent home for the Jewish refugees had proven to be difficult, with many nations refusing to issue entry visas. Palestine under the British mandate sealed its gates to Jewish immigration, so the only avenue was an illegal one. When intercepted, boats carrying refugees were directed to Cyprus where people were accommodated in British-run camps.

In addition to UNRRA, the Jewish camps were supported by American relief agencies. Between June and mid-August 1945, they welcomed thirteen to fifteen thousand refugees, and thousands more subsequently.[6] Some of the camps were in former military barracks and others in abandoned villas and monasteries.[7] Often people moved from one place to the next when they found friends or relatives. The camps went on to become places for the rebirth of peoples' lives. They could celebrate and rekindle Jewish culture with newspapers, theatres, schools and the *Hachsharot*, where people were taught skills in preparation for life in Palestine. Among the languages commonly spoken, one could hear Yiddish, Romanian and Hungarian, and the signs were written in Hebrew. People often congregated and were supported according to their political affiliations, such as by religious or left-leaning parties. The camps were a true melting pot where survivors from many nations, some who had lost spouses and children, mixed, fell in love,

formed new unions, and bore children. The places had a unique spirit that could only be generated by people whose lives were marked by unimaginable tragedy, yet they maintained a belief in the future.[8]

Survivors had to cope with traumas, memories and habits that were acquired in concentration or labour camps. Most were highly resilient and rapidly adjusted to their new life, but for some the effect of post-traumatic stress disorder lingered on.[9] Remaining a sole member of a large family took away the support system that some badly needed. Wanting to be first in line for everything as a result of years of food scarcity under brutal authoritarian discipline was common. Another symptom of stress was rapid eating or hiding and storing food, in case there would be none left tomorrow. No psychological support system was put in place in those early days to help survivors cope with what they had witnessed and experienced.

* * *

After a train ride from Traunstein that lasted several days and crossed Germany and Austria, the men arrived at Milan where the headquarters of the Jewish refugee centre for northern Italy was located. They registered, were given a small allowance, then taken to the city of Modena two hundred kilometres southeast of Milan. They settled in a former military academy turned DP camp. Chaim fell in love at first sight with Italy and Modena. The milder weather, the easy-going manners and warmth of its people, the joy of outdoor life, the food, the beauty of the land and the city with its squares and colourful articulated buildings captivated him. He ate oranges and tasted olives, a rare expensive commodity in Poland, and drank fine wines for the first time in life. As a young bachelor the fashionable women drew his attention. He was handsome, a natural charmer in a place that loved flirting, far removed from the somewhat formal habits and culture he had known in Łódź. It was a much-needed transition period that made up for the lost years of his young life. He soon mastered enough words in Italian to communicate with the locals and immersed himself in his new surroundings.

* * *

Chaim kept looking for lost relatives but reluctantly accepted the fact that he might be the only one who had made it. The men applied for and were refused entry visas to several countries, including the U.S. and Australia. While waiting, they decided that they needed to support themselves beyond the food and the lodging that were provided in the camp. They knew that, wherever they would migrate, they would need money to start a new life and so were determined to make some.

Using their trading skills, they found that large profits could be made by selling products in Italy's south, such as American-made contraband cigarettes and ladies' stockings. Putting together their little money, they purchased goods and took night trains to cities like Naples and Bari where clients waited. They gradually expanded their dealings.

Nineteen months after arriving in Italy, Chaim was enjoying the best that the country had to offer. With his new earnings he acquired tailored suits, ate in fine restaurants and travelled to Milan to attend the opera at La Scala. Surrounded by a supportive band of friends, he felt physically strong and gradually regained the confidence one needed to build a new life. Some of his friends found spouses, bid farewell and travelled to places where a distant relative was willing to sponsor them, a condition to being issued a visa. After making new friends, in early March 1947 Chaim decided to move to the Adriatica DP camp near Milan. It was a bigger place with a richer cultural life and, being near a large urban centre, it offered ample business opportunities.

Having his own family was on Chaim's mind. Finding a suitable spouse of the Jewish faith was not simple after the war. The Nazis wiped out generations of young men and women of the same cohort. Also, the traditional prewar courting process that many of the survivors were accustomed to, using the service of a matchmaker who knew or inquired about the family's reputation, no longer existed. In most cases, like Chaim's, the extended family of the bride and the groom had perished. Spending a long time with someone and getting to know them better was also not common. The camps were the meeting places, and first impressions counted for a lot. When people met and liked each other, a marriage proposal soon followed. People took a leap of faith only to figure out later their compatibility with the one they had chosen as a life partner. Despite those challenges, the urge to form families was very strong, and Adriatica celebrated many weddings. Often there were

several ceremonies in a single evening and wedding dresses were hot commodities.

Chaim met Dina Piha at one such wedding, where guests happen to sit next to each other in rows. She was his opposite in culture and personality. A Sephardi with roots that dated back centuries to Turkey and Spain, she was shy and soft-spoken, with dark hair and olive skin. A survivor, in August 1944 she had been deported with her entire Jewish community of 1,673 from the Isle of Rhodes, then under the rule of the Italian Social Republic (in reality under Nazi military command) and after a gruelling three-week voyage by boat and train, she arrived at Birkenau and survived a selection. She worked as a forced labourer in several camps, withstood a death march and in May 1945 was liberated in Bergen Belsen. She was one of only 151 of her community to make it out alive.[10]

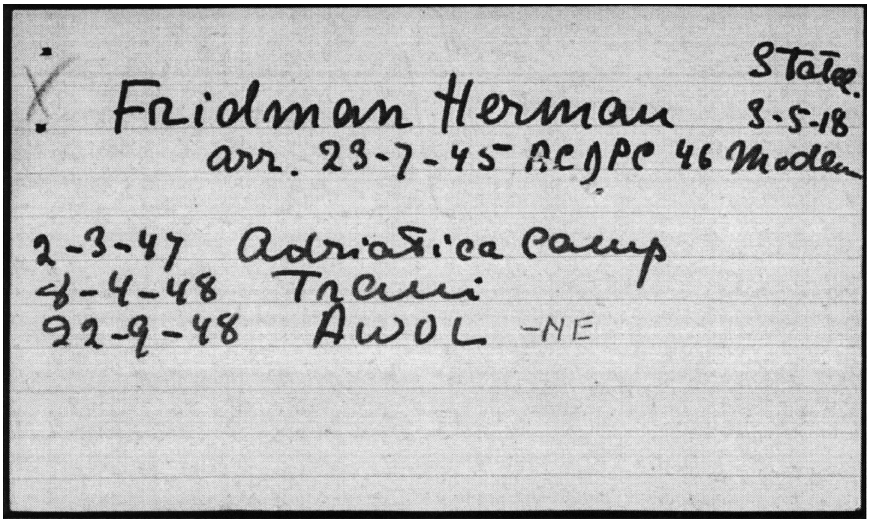
In the DP camp, Dina volunteered at the infirmary, and her manners drew the attention of many young men whose courtship she rebuffed. When seeing Chaim, she was taken by his good looks, outgoing personality and his knowing the ways of the world. He was taken by her simple ways, kindness and the Sephardi culture which was foreign to him. Being also a survivor, he knew that she would understand his experience and the challenges he might face. They spoke Italian and often travelled to Milan for a stroll, to dine in restaurants or eat gelato in one of the cafés along the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II and to attend opera. After a short courtship, they decided to tie the knot. Having saved some money and finding out about the modest financial support extended by the agencies to those who wished to live on their own, Chaim suggested they rent a place near Milan where they could begin their life as a married couple. He continued his sales trips to the south while she stayed at home.

In the months after the wedding, Chaim and Dina got to know each other as they began to build a life together, in a way that only those who survived a near-death experience could. Neither of them had a family member nearby, just a small circle of friends. He got accustomed to her Mediterranean cooking and she joined him on some of his trips. Having difficulty adjusting to the colder weather of the north, Dina suggested they move to Italy's south. Chaim agreed and they wrapped up their few belongings and travelled to the city of Bari where the southern

16.1 Dina and Chaim near Milan, Italy c. 1948.

headquarters of the DP camps were. They were sent to a camp near the city of Trani, where as a couple they were given quarters of their own.[11]

Trani was a suitable place for Chaim and Dina to bond. The small town that dated back to Roman times, with its meandering narrow roads and stone building that arched passageways, faced a port where fishing boats docked. Many of the town restaurants served seafood and good wine. There was even a small synagogue, a remnant of a Jewish community that thrived in this place centuries ago. Spending the spring and summer months of 1948 on the white shores of the Adriatic Sea, traveling to the "Santas", the small collections of housing enclaves where some refugees lived in abandoned villas, enjoying the southern food, warm Italian hospitality and relaxed manners which reminded Dina of her native Rhodes would remain a memorable experience of which the couple spoke fondly for years.



16.2 Chaim's displaced person camps registration card. The last posting, absent without leave (AWOL) indicates their departure to Israel.

Chaim and Dina's mastery of basic Italian and having enough money to engage with Italian merchants and traders in economically ravaged Italy creates an impression of overall positive Jewish-Italian relations. However, Italian perceptions of Jews as 'foreign' or "bands of new occupiers" greatly increased when the refugees wore British Army uniforms they had been given and were granted free train tickets, a privilege Italians did not enjoy. Initially hospitable and helpful toward Displaced Persons and Holocaust survivors, there was not uncommon incidence of Italians taking advantage of these Jews in business, and other micro-aggressions. Yet, perhaps more importantly, Italians did not fully embrace the newcomers as they knew that the Jews were on their land only temporarily until they would be granted a visa to another country.[12]

Throughout 1948 the DP camps began to empty out and wind down. Several nations such as Canada, the U.S. and Australia loosened their strict immigration policies and issued visas to refugees. On May 14 an independent State called Israel was declared, ending the British mandate in Palestine. The gates to free immigration were opened wide.

Chaim and Dina had to choose a place to live. Dina had a brother and a sister in Israel who fortunately had immigrated there before the war, whom she wanted to join. Chaim's uncle Mendel, Abram's brother and his family also lived in Israel. They debated for a while whether a better life might await them in North America. After some discussions, Dina prevailed and, in September 1948, they sailed from Bari on the MV *Kedma,* a cargo ship, to Israel.