

# Holocaust to Hope

By Chaim Poran

## Prologue

As Europe emerged from the aftermath of World War I, Germany was singled out as the sole culprit of the war and was levied with enormous financial reparation responsibilities. That crushing debt along with the onset of the global great depression provided the backdrop for the emergence of the Nazi evil, when in 1933, following the elections, the Nazis led by Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. Among their key ideological cornerstones, Hitler and the Nazis believed that Germans were “racially superior” and that Jews were “inferior” and an alien threat to what they called “the German racial community” that had to be annihilated. The Nazis also identified other “inferior” people they wanted to eliminate for not fitting the ideal of a superior German race, such as gypsies, homosexuals, and mentally and physically disabled persons. During the Holocaust, which mostly happened during World War II through May 1945, more than two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe, about six million people, were killed by the Nazis and their collaborators.

In this story we travel together back in time to meet two survivors of the Holocaust inferno. Through their story we struggle to grasp the unimaginable horrific atrocities that the Nazis and their collaborators unleashed on mankind because of their hatred and bigotry. Our journey begins almost 100 years ago taking us to Eastern Europe to meet my parents. Describing their remarkable passage, I will share some scarce old photos and documents that survived the Holocaust intermixed with more recent pictures from my visits to Eastern Europe, as I followed my parents’ unlikely survival and the circle of life and hope through which I have written this, their story.

### *My Parents, Menachem and Sarah*



## Krakow

Krakow, Poland and its vicinity was a major hub of Jewish life in southern Poland. By the 1930's Krakow's area population was about 320,000, of whom about one in four were Jewish, with many of them living in the thriving Jewish neighborhood of Kazmierz, very near the Old Town center.



My Father, Mencahem, was born in 1923 to Chaya and Abraham Forschner in a small town, Dabrowa Tarnowska, about 65 miles east of Krakow. My grandfather, Abraham, a hardworking store owner, had a small store at the town center. While they were not poor, they lived modestly and always struggled to support the needs of the growing family. Both grandpa Abraham and grandma Chaya had several close family relatives in Krakow. As my grandfather's business became more stable, in the late 1920s, the family moved to Krakow and rented a two-story townhouse at Długosza 5, where it still stands today across the Vistula River, a 20-minute walk to Kazmierz and Old Town. Although my grandfather continued to operate his store in Dabrowa Tarnowska, my grandparents believed that by moving to Krakow they would afford better educational and cultural opportunities for their four children.

The Forscher kin were well-rooted in the Krakow area of Poland for many generations before the war. My grandmother Chaya was the daughter of the renowned Jewish scholar, Rabbi Aaron Dershowitz from Krakow. Grandma Chaya was fluent in Polish and was well read in European literature. She was greatly influenced by her older sister Sarah. Sarah was a beautiful, regal looking woman, assimilated within the Krakow society. Well educated and fluent in several languages, she was up to the latest European cultural trends, something that was not common among Jews of Krakow at the time and quite a rarity among married Jewish women. Sarah, who did not have children of her own, was close to her younger sister, my grandmother Chaya and her children, and extended financial assistance and support to them once they moved to Krakow.

Grandpa Abraham, an observant Jew, was often conflicted between his appreciation of his wife's liberal views and the constrictive expectations of his orthodox Jewish peers. My father was the youngest of the four Forscher children, with sparkling blue eyes, an unkempt mane of black curly hair, and a cute innocent face. By many accounts, he was frequently the center of attention and easily forgiven for his occasional mischief.

### My father's family in Krakow 1938 and recently

**Józefa Piłsudskiego Bridge**

My father and his sister Esther  
May 1938



My father, my sister and me,  
May 2004 (at the same spot  
my father stood in 1938)



Jana Długosza 5, Krakow  
2017



Early in 1933, my grandma Chaya foresaw the gathering evil of the Nazi regime in Germany, while nearly everyone else in Krakow did not. So, in 1934, against the wishes of my grandfather, she blessed her oldest daughter, my aunt Shoshana who was 19 at the time, when Shoshana left Poland and immigrated to British Palestine with a Zionist group which she had joined one year earlier. The younger children, including my father, were assimilated into Polish society and studied in technical and trade schools.

In addition to his school studies, during after-school hours my father was also training as a machine-shop apprentice. Money was always tight at their modest rented townhouse on Długosza, but frugal Grandma Chaya made sure that they were stylishly dressed when they left the house for their daily endeavors and interactions with *Krakowianie* (Cracovian) gentiles.

At dawn on Friday, September 1, 1939, World War II began as Nazi Germany's military launched their *Blitzkrieg* invasion of Poland with a massive ground and air attack, vastly overwhelming the underpowered Polish army.



However, the City of Krakow remained mostly unscathed as it surrendered to the Germans without a fight on September 6, while the Germans conquered the rest of Poland a month later. In preparation of their invasion of Poland, the Nazis had already divided eastern Poland with the Soviet Union according to their non-aggression treaty, the Molotov–Ribbentrop

Pact, signed on August 23 just a few weeks earlier, essentially clearing the way for the Nazi invasion.

## The Eastern Escape

With the German *Luftwaffe* airstrikes heard around Krakow on Friday, September 1<sup>st</sup>, my grandmother Chaya's darkest fears became reality by the brutal efficiency of the Nazi invasion. During that day, sensing the urgency, my grandpa had collected all his available cash and brought it back to the house. The lugubrious Shabbat dinner at the Forschner house that night was dominated by intense discussions of what to do next, and the heartbreaking decisions that were made late that night left everyone in tears. No one got much sleep that night.

Then, from Saturday morning, notwithstanding the sanctity of the Shabbat, the day was dedicated to frantic activities as my grandparents prepared my 16-year-old father and his 22-year-old brother, my uncle Moshe, for their eastern escape. Grandpa used an old map he had and marked a suggested path for them to follow. Grandma made sure that they memorized the names of trusted relatives in a few villages along the suggested route through southeastern Poland. At dusk, the two brothers huddled with my grandparents and their 19-year-old sister, my aunt Esther, hugging and weeping, not knowing if they will ever see each other again.



Imagery ©2018 Landsat / Copernicus, Map data ©2018 Google 20 mi

And so it was that on Saturday night September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1939 my father and uncle, each carrying a shoulder bag with some food and water, having some money stashed in different pockets and inside their socks, started marching. They followed the old map, crossing Krakow's thinning neighborhoods towards the east and soon were walking into the darkness at the fringes of a thick forest of pines and spruces along the road to Tarnow on their way to Russia. The brothers were frightened but determined. They mostly moved during the nights, hiding in the forest during the days witnessing the mayhem of German airstrikes and passing close to several skirmishes between rapidly advancing German armored units and scant Polish army resistance.

Although they were both fit and able to walk at a rapid pace, they had to hide in the forest to the sounds of every passing German unit and avoid the local villages where they feared they could be identified as Jews and ratted over to the Nazis. They realized that their progress was intermittent and slow but accepted it as a tradeoff for perceived safety. On the way, they located relatives in two villages where they replenished their food and water and heard horrifying news about Jews being rounded up into cramped ghettos in many Polish towns where the Nazis had already established control.

It took them almost three weeks to cover about 130 miles reaching the San River which marked the newly defined border between Germany and the Soviet Union at that area. The river, swollen with heavy rains was flowing fast and furious, creating a formidable obstacle to their escape, especially since they could not swim. There, after three days of hiding, they located a Polish smuggler who, for a hefty sum, agreed to guide them across the river at night. During their first crossing attempt they were discovered by a German army (*Wermacht*) patrol who opened heavy fire on them forcing them to escape back into the forest, lucky to return to the smuggler's house unscathed.

The following night the smuggler took them on a different route that avoided the *Wermacht* patrols, leading them to a more remote location where the river flow was slower and the water was less deep. There, they were able to cross the river walking with water up to their necks, tied to each other with a rope wrapped around their waists, while carrying dry clothes, food, and other personal belongings in their bags held over their heads.

Then, after climbing the river bank, they followed the smuggler's instructions walking in the dark to a nearby abandoned barn where they changed into dry clothes and contemplated their next move. The next day they followed a dirt road towards the east in the area that was supposed to be controlled by the Soviet Union. Soon they realized that indeed there were no German troops around. Relieved from the Nazi threat, they were still cautious and decided to

hide the rest of the day and continue walking during night hours. They covered the next 50 miles in three nights, arriving in Lviv on September 27<sup>th</sup>, the day that Poland formally surrendered to the Nazis.

Lviv is the largest town in western Ukraine. Then, it was a large regional town (Lvov in Russian), home to a distant relative. As they approached the town, they saw several Soviet army armored troop encampments which appeared to be newly established. Those were the units which had taken over the area earlier in September, a few weeks before my father and uncle arrived.

In Lviv, my father and uncle located their family acquaintance, Moshe Gruber, who was very welcoming and helped them settle in as they started pursuing odd jobs. It was while working at a school that my uncle met a pretty local Russian woman. They soon fell in love and got married, in the process also obtaining Russian residency papers for my uncle. My father however remained undocumented, so when he was stopped at a Soviet Army check point in early winter 1940, he was arrested and locked up in the central Lviv jail. There he was subject to brutal interrogation by agents from the Soviet Ministry of Interior (“NKVD”) who suspected him of being a spy for the Germans because of his ability to speak German, Russian and Polish.

After several days of beatings, the agents determined that he was indeed just an undocumented Polish refugee. He was nevertheless sent to a *gulag* (forced labor camp) with other Polish prisoners. Being young and tough, he recovered from his interrogation injuries and managed to survive the hunger, horrendous living conditions, and the brunt of the 1940 freezing winter in the *gulag*. Then, in the fall of 1940, to his astonishment, he was informed that his request to be repatriated to German-occupied Poland was approved, and he was sent back to the Lviv area for repatriation. Unbeknownst to him, some 300 miles to the north, the joyful world of a young girl who one day would become his wife, was about to turn into hell.

## **Kreva, Belarus**

Kreva is a village in northeastern Belarus where my mother, Sarah was born in 1930 to Esther and Chaim Perski. The Perski kin inhabited what is today northeastern Belarus for several centuries before WWII. While their relationship to my family is unknown, notable Perskis from the area include Simon Peres, the former President and Prime Minister of Israel born near Kreva as Szymon Perski, and Lauren Bacall whose paternal grandfather was a Perski from the Kreva area.



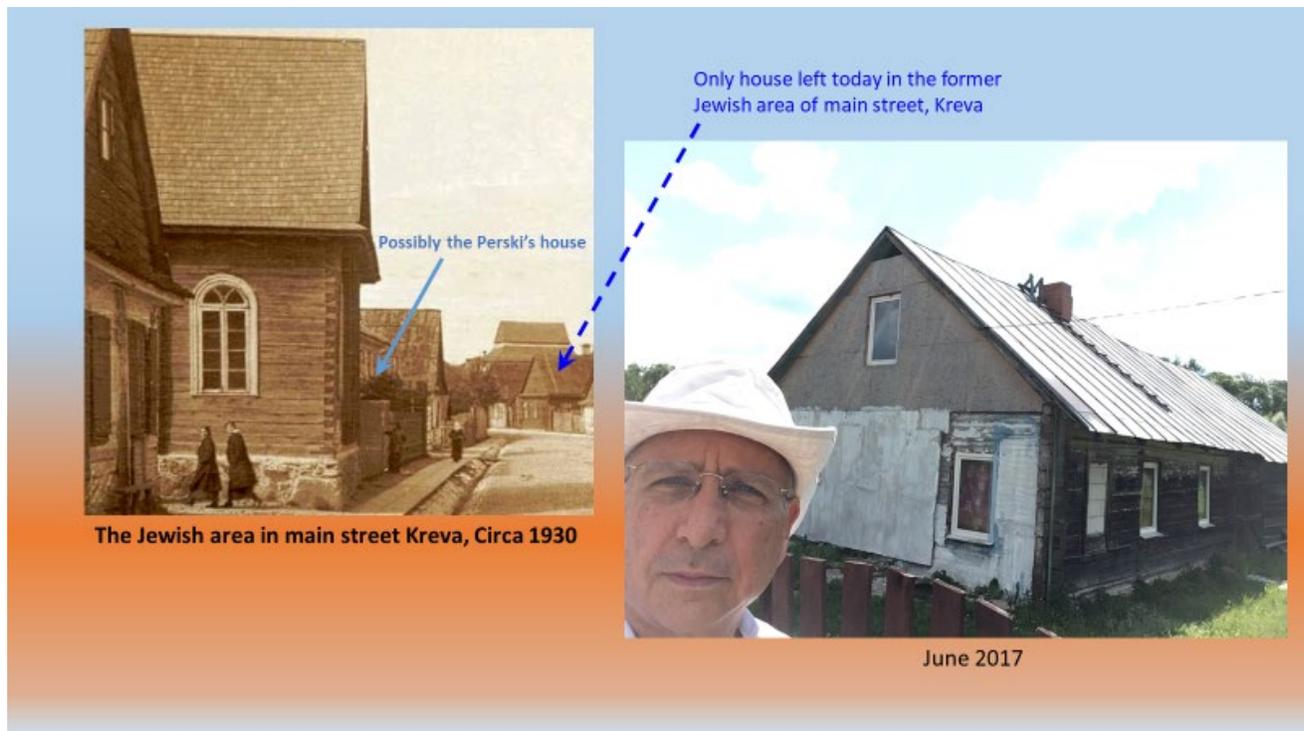
Chaim Perski had two cousins, Gershon and Judah Milikowsky, although the family connections have not been completely clarified. Curiously, a notable Milikowsky whose family relationship remains unclear was Rabbi Nathan Milikowsky. He was born in Kreva in 1879 and was the grandfather of Benjamin Netanyahu, a former Prime Minister of Israel.

The Perski and Milikowsky families who lived in Kreva were unique amongst the Jewish people of that area in that they had leases of large farms and made their livelihood as successful farmers. My grandpa Chaim partnered with his cousins Gershon and Judah Milikowsky in a long-term (perpetual) lease of the large farm estate they named “Messamina.”

While Poland, Russia, Lithuania, and then shortly, the Soviet Union, had controlled the Kreva area at one time or another during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it returned to Polish jurisdiction in 1922. It was still a Polish territory, when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 placed Kreva east on the demarcation line – back under Soviet Union control.

Kreva is located amidst lush rolling hills and valleys, crisscrossed by lazy meandering creeks nourishing rich farmland, which at spring time has always been blooming with seemingly endless lavender colored blossom as far as the eye can see.

Such was the incredible sight that welcomed our group of several family members as we entered Kreva during our spring 2017 visit when we were searching for what had once been the Perski's home, neighborhood, and farm.



The Perski's had a large house surrounded by a garden, setback from the street. However, during our 2017 visit we realized that the Perski's house, like almost all the other Jewish homes, were destroyed during the war. We met with a local elder who had lived there his entire life, including the war years when he had been about my mother's age. After hearing his emotional account about the Jewish neighborhood, we learned where the Perski's home once stood.

We did however confirm the location of the Messamina farm about a mile from town center and went there with great anticipation.



### **The Messamina Farm 2017**

There was little activity at the large farm house when we visited on Sunday in June 2017, as most local farm hands had the day off. We saw the entrance off the main road where some 80 years ago there had been a gate with a large sign reading “Messamina.” From our tour of the farm and its boundaries it appeared to cover approximately 300 acres. When my family lived there, the farm had large orchards, gardens and fields of grains, flax, and strawberries. They even exported roses all the way to Germany.

We saw a little old house at the edge of the farm, which, based on the accounts of nearby residents, was where the farm’s foreman, Stephan Andralavich, a Belarussian native, had lived in 1941 with his wife and a young teenage daughter, Lydia. Stephan had been employed for many years by my family, the farm’s owners, who promoted him to the farm foreman, in charge of organizing the farm hands and their work chores.

In 2017 the farm was a government-owned *kolkhoz* (cooperative farm) as it had been for many decades since the Soviet era after WWII, when all agricultural properties had been seized by the communist government.



**Sunday afternoon stroll in Kreva, May, 1941**

I included two of the very few cherished family photos from Kreva that survived the war showing Perski and Milikowsky family members back in the spring of 1941. These photos were taken on a Sunday in May of 1941, and although the colors are difficult to discern in this black & white picture, the adults were all wearing comfortable European clothing fashionable for the time. Some 60 years later, in her quaint townhouse in Baltimore, my Aunt Libby explained the genuine joyful looks of my relatives in these photos. After all, she was at the center of the group on that day. "It was spring time, everything blooming, and we were happy, immersed in our small world, devoid of worries, undisturbed with the news from Nazi-occupied Poland."

That Sunday, as they often did, the Perski and Milikowsky relatives gathered at the Perski's home and had a sumptuous lunch. After lunch, the younger adults with children in tow went for a stroll to the nearby castle ruins savoring the afternoon sun of that glorious spring day. For several centuries Kreva has been known for its majestic castle that was built in the 14th century. Although the castle was severely damaged during WWI, its ruins have become an important historical site for both Lithuania and Belarus and have remained nearly unchanged from the end of WWI, somehow escaping further damage during WWII. It was a popular local attraction back in the 1930s as it is at present.



### Kreva Castle through the years

By spring of 1941, horrifying accounts of the catastrophes being inflicted by the Nazis on Jews were whispered more frequently in town. However, no sense of urgency was felt among the Kreva Jews, certainly not at the Perski's home where it was near impossible for them to imagine the darkness which awaited them thereafter.

### Nazis Arrive in Kreva

On June 22, 1941, just as summer began, Nazi Germany invaded the western Soviet territory in Operation Barbarossa with their Axis allies' armies, deploying more than four million troops and blatantly disregarding their non-aggression treaty with the Soviet Union. The borrowed time of the Kreva Jews vaporized less than a week later, on a gray rainy morning as *Wehrmacht* (German army) tanks and infantry units blitzed through the Kreva area pressing on eastwards, destroying much of the town due to sporadic resistance of Soviet Army troops.



***Wehrmacht* troops conquering Kreva, late June, 1941**

The German army quickly organized its occupation force in the Kreva area, and a couple of weeks later had already identified many of the local Jews. They began their systematic persecution by first imposing a decree requiring all Jews to always wear the *Juden Stern*, a yellow star-shaped badge.

In September 1941, the Germans forcibly moved the Kreva Jews, about 800, into a makeshift ghetto fenced with barbed wire around the damaged synagogue area where a few dozen standing houses remained including the Perski's house. Almost all of the houses had been damaged in the skirmishes between the German and the Soviet army units earlier that summer. The Germans jammed all Kreva Jews into those ghetto houses, where single families had lived before the war, as the *Wehrmacht* commander assured the terrified Jews that it was for their protection.

The Perski family tried to adapt to the difficult new reality of ghetto existence as they were forced to share their damaged house with three other Jewish families. My grandfather Chaim and his Milikowsky partners were forbidden to leave the ghetto to attend to their farm, except Noah Milikowsky who was working at the farm and managed to hide there.

In the ghetto, my grandparents along with their eldest, my Aunt Libby, did the best they could to help the other families around them. Aunt Libby, who had already graduated from a

well-known Minsk *Gymnasium* (high school), excelled in languages. She was fluent in German, Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, and Yiddish and even rudimentary Hebrew. She was also quite good at math.

After her graduation from the *Gymnasium* in 1939 she returned to Kreva and worked as a school teacher and secretary. With the German invasion, the school was closed and Libby devoted her time to helping her mother in caring for her younger siblings, Hannah, Isaac, my mother Sarah, and little Ida (nicknamed Itale), as the Perski family attempted to find any kind of normalcy that could comfort their new frightening circumstances.

Aunt Libby stood out among the Kreva Jews because of her language skills, and she was soon ordered to report to the *Wermacht's* Non-Commissioned-Officer (NCO) in charge of ghetto operations, *Oberfeldwebel* Kurz, who coldly explained to her in German that she would serve him as his assistant. He said that if she were to refuse or fail to follow his instructions, he would personally shoot her. He then directed Aunt Libby to organize the work at the ghetto including food services, housekeeping, and toilet cleaning. The Germans also learned that my grandfather Chaim was one of the more affluent and influential Kreva Jews. Soon after that discovery, they raided the Perski family house where they found and confiscated some gold bars which Chaim had hidden earlier that summer in preparation for the uncertain dark future.

With the cold harshness of the approaching winter, their previously charmed life was quickly fading into a distant memory. There they were, my proud grandparents, with their five children in one of the larger rooms of the house that they shared with the other families, shivering with the chilly air, on Saturday afternoon, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, lighting a single candle to celebrate my mother's 11<sup>th</sup> birthday. Unbeknownst to them, their meager existence was just a mild, brief prelude of their impending hell.

After a few months in the ghetto, realizing that they may be soon transported away, Gershon and Judah Milikowsky escaped to join Noah at their farm. They found to their astonishment that their foreman, Stephan Andralavich, had taken over the farm where Noah was working for him and hiding. Stephan was not welcoming to the Milikowsky brothers, his bosses, whom he realized had become hunted refugees whose lives depended on hiding from the Nazis.

However, when offered significant monetary compensation by Gershon, he agreed to hide the three on the farm where they managed to pass a few messages to my grandfather back at the Kreva Ghetto.

## **The Kreva Ghetto Liquidation**

It seems that the worst occasions of my parents' journey through the Holocaust were always associated with viciously bone-chilling winter days. On one brutally cold winter day in early January 1942, a junior *Waffen*-SS officer arrived in Kreva to begin orderly liquidation of the temporary ghetto. The Perski family was targeted for one of the first transfers. The *Wermacht* soldiers thrust them into a truck that less than an hour later brought them to the larger ghetto at Ashmyany, just 20 miles northwest of Kreva.

Following the Kreva Ghetto liquidation In January 1942, Stephan Andralavich recognized the dire situation of the Jewish farm owners. With my grandfather Chaim hauled away by the Nazis, never to return, and with the three Milikowsky refugees hiding for their lives on the farm, he saw a great opportunity to take over the farm.

After the war it was revealed that a few weeks following the Kreva Ghetto liquidation, Stephan had murdered the three hiding Milikowskys, and had apparently buried them somewhere on the farm never to be found again, asserting his ownership of the farm which he ran with the assistance of his daughter. He befriended the regional *Wehrmacht* commanders and flourished as he became a much-appreciated supplier of farm products to the *Wehrmacht*.

Those wartime murders were never investigated by the Soviet authorities in the post war years. During my visit to Kreva in 2017, I found out that Stephan had died peacefully in his old age some thirty years before. His daughter Lydia had also died at that same little house near the farm, several years prior to my visit.

## **Ashmyany, Gudogaj, and Murders at Ponary**

Shortly after their arrival at Ashmyany, Aunt Libby was summoned to the *Wehrmacht* command office where she was ordered to start working as a translator. Somehow, the family managed to survive the appalling conditions in the Ashmyany ghetto, helped by the warm summer of 1942. It all changed in October 1942 as the *Waffen*-SS arrived with selection orders and transferred many able-bodied men and women to various forced-labor camps in Lithuania.

During the selection, Aunt Libby, recognized for her language skills, was ordered to join a group designated for the forced-labor camp in Gudogaj. The family was devastated as Libby was being separated from them and pushed towards the waiting truck.

My Aunt Hanna, the second oldest of the five Perski children, courageously stepped forward towards the armed *Waffen-SS* soldiers and pleaded with them to allow her to join her older sister, demonstrating her German speaking skills. After looking her over, the NCO in charge decided that she could be a useful able-bodied worker and added her name to the list before she was pushed into the truck with Aunt Libby and the others.

Gudogaj, a small town (now in Belarus) some 14 miles north of Ashmyany and 28 miles east of Vilnius, was where that forced-labor camp had been established to support the *Wermacht* base in charge of the local rail depot and checkpoint. The *Wermacht* base commander immediately ordered Aunt Libby to assist in translating his orders to the imprisoned workers, while forcing her to join the workers in performing their laborious daily tasks including cleaning the barracks and cooking for the soldiers, and even digging drainage ditches. With her sister Hanna alongside her, they managed to survive the winter of 1943.

However, in mid-March of 1943 Aunt Libby fell ill and was unable to work. She begged the *Wermacht* commander to permit her return back to Ashmyany with her sister, where, she explained, the *Wermacht* much needed their language skills. Shortly afterwards the sick Aunt Libby was sent back to Ashmyany, but Hanna was not so lucky as her request to return was ignored and she remained behind at the Gudogaj camp, utterly terrified and alone for the first time since their ordeal began.

A few weeks later, in April 1943, in the aftermath of the German forces defeat in Stalingrad and the subsequent westerly advances of Soviet troops, the Germans decided to liquidate the Gudogaj camp. The remaining Jewish prisoners, several dozen, including my Aunt Hanna were hastily transported by trucks some 40 miles east, to the Ponary death camp (nowadays Panerė, a suburb of Vilnius, Lithuania) where, shortly after their arrival, they were forced to strip, jostled into an open trench and shot at close range by Nazi SS *Einsatzkommando* and their Lithuanian militia collaborators.

## **Deathly Ziezmariai**

About two weeks after her return to Ashmyany at about the same time that Gudogaj camp was liquidated sending Hanna to her death, just as Libby had somewhat recovered and the ghetto became surrounded with a colorful spring blossom, a *Waffen-SS* unit arrived to liquidate the Ashmyany ghetto. The SS soldiers forced the gathered Jews into two lines. Able bodied men and women and their families who managed to stay together were shoved into a

line designated for transport to various forced-labor camps. Elderly and sick along with some young children who were separated from their families in the bedlam were forced into the second line onto trucks that transported them to locations of their impending death.

Somehow, the six members of the Perski family clung to each other as they were pushed into a truck that dumped them and their meager belongings at the Ziežmariai forced-labor camp, (nowadays in Lithuania) some 70 miles to the west of Ashmyany, on the main Vilnius-Kaunas Road. By spring 1943 when the Perski family arrived there, about 1,000 Jews were imprisoned at the Ziežmariai camp.

Men and women, old people and children were forced to work in hard labor chores and live in cramped primitive quarters with little food, bedding, or medication. Many died as contagious diseases spread.

The Nazis had enacted the *Judenräte* Decree in 1939, and had been implementing it in most ghettos and forced-labor camps across occupied Europe. The SS enforced the decree at the Ziežmariai camp, requiring the imprisoned Jews to elect amongst themselves several men to form the *Judenrat* that administered prisoners' activities. The main responsibility of the Ziežmariai camp *Judenrat* was to organize the prisoners for forced-labor chores and report to the SS commandant's office.

My grandfather Chaim was assigned for hard labor tasks outside the camp, and Aunt Libby was sent to work on a nearby farm. My grandmother Esther was ordered to stay at the camp and care for her three younger children, Ida, my mother Sarah, and Isaac, as well as for several other younger children whose parents were sent for hard labor chores outside the camp.

Springtime of 1943 did not abate the Perski family hell, when in May of 1943 they were dealt two more lethal blows. A few weeks earlier, after arriving at the Ziežmariai camp, Ida fell ill. With the appalling conditions at the camp and absence of any medical treatment her condition quickly deteriorated. Finally, she was transported in critical condition to the Kovno Ghetto Hospital where she died shortly afterwards. She was buried at the Kovno Ghetto cemetery across the rail tracks. During our visit in 2017, we searched the old Jewish cemetery area for Ida's grave among several hundred remaining tombstones spread around an abandoned post-WWII Soviet Union era factory, but were unable to locate her grave since it was in the part of the cemetery which had been destroyed by the Soviets to make room for the large factory.

One day, later in spring 1943, at a glorious sunset, Aunt Libby returned to the camp from a difficult workday at the farm when she was met by the horror of wailing crowds. Earlier that day, the SS carried out an *Aktion* by rounding up dozens of women and children who were taken to a nearby forest where they were shot point blank in a pit, including my grandmother Esther and several of the young children she was caring for. Miraculously, just weeks before, my mother Sarah and Uncle Isaac were assigned to work at one of the camp's workshops, so they escaped the massacre being at the workshop, while their mother, my grandmother, was taken away and murdered.

### **The Kovno Ghetto**

It was the end of June 1943 when the *Wermacht* liquidated the Ziezmariai forced-labor camp and transferred the surviving prisoners by trucks to the Kovno Ghetto less than 20 miles to the west. The four remaining members of the Perski family were utterly devastated but with Aunt Libby bearing the responsibility of caring for her two younger siblings, they somehow managed to stay together through the liquidation and transport to Kovno (nowadays, Kaunas Lithuania).



**Forcibly-Transported Jews arrive at the Kovno Ghetto, June 1943**

There they joined some 20,000 Jews living at the remaining part of the ghetto, which had been established in summer 1941 in Kovno's Vilijampolė neighborhood (Slabodka) and had been reduced in size after the mass murders of around 10,000 Jews perpetrated by the Germans and their Lithuanian collaborators at the ghetto and the nearby Ninth Fort in late 1941. The remaining ghetto area, enclosed by tall barbed wire fences, had densely packed mostly primitive houses with no running water, where families were forced to cram together with each person allocated a living space of no more than ten square feet.

The Jewish council (*Aeltestenrat*) served as a go-between the ghetto population and the Nazis with their Lithuanian collaborators who oversaw the ghetto. The Council created workshops inside the ghetto for those women, children, and elderly who could not participate in the labor brigades that were forced to perform hard-labor construction works especially at the nearby military airbase in Aleksotas. The Council even established a small Jewish police force in an attempt to minimize interventions of the Nazi and Lithuanian murderers.

Grandfather Chaim was assigned to one of these forced-labor brigades and was struggling to survive one brutal day at a time, unable to care for his children. Luckily, Aunt Libby was assigned by the Council to work at a nearby munition factory which enabled her to watch over her younger siblings. The Council hoped the Germans would not kill Jews who were producing for the army, as Aunt Libby and about 6,000 other Jews from the ghetto, were hanging on to life contingent on their usefulness as factory workers.



**Forced-Labor Brigades Assemble at the Kovno Ghetto, Winter 1944**

Because they were among the older teens and had worked in a ghetto workshop, my mother and uncle were spared from the massacre of March 27 and 28, 1944 when about 1,600 children aged 12 or less, and 900 adults including many of their parents who attempted to intervene and people over age 55, were rounded up and murdered by the SS in the *Kinderaktion* (Children Action). *Oberscharführer* Bruno Kittel, the SS NCO who oversaw these mass murders, personally shot, one by one, 33 Jewish ghetto policemen who refused under SS torture to disclose hiding locations of additional children. Bruno Kittel is one of the Nazi mass murderers who disappeared at the end of the war to never be found.

## **Krakow, Poland**

In the meantime, 400 miles west, hell had descended onto the Krakow area where my father's family was. In the fall of 1940 my father was released by the Russians back into Nazi-occupied Poland with a group of other Polish refugees. After his time in the gulag, my father did not look like a Jew. While he appeared gaunt and disheveled with shortcut hair, he was also lean, muscular and tough. Always wearing an old Polish farmer's cap and dressed in common worn-out farmer's garb, he looked like one.

He managed to inconspicuously avoid German army checkpoints by hiding during daytime, and walked at nights into the sparsely populated hilly area until he reached the railroad which he reckoned to be east-west direction, so he followed it in the westerly direction that led him to the regional town of Przemyśl. There he proceeded to walk towards the rail depot without attracting unwanted attention since he looked and spoke like a Polish farm hand. He waited in the trees behind the rail depot trying to figure out where the trains were headed. In the evening after overhearing a couple of rail workers, he identified a freight train headed to Krakow and managed to quickly hop into an empty car.

As the train slowed to a crawl before entering the Krakow central rail depot on the southeast side of the city, he jumped off the car into some bushes near a large culvert where he hid, resting until dawn. From there he made his way on foot, hurried but not running to avoid drawing attention, his heart beating with anticipation. He recognized the area well and covered the distance of about one mile in less than 20 minutes until he reached the Długosza 5 townhouse where to his horror he found it locked and empty, as were other townhouses on the block where their Jewish neighbors used to live.

Somehow, an older Polish woman neighbor recognized him from across the street and gestured for him to come over. He did so with great trepidations, and when he came near her doorstep, the woman, a worried expression on her face, told him in hushed voice that his family and the other Jewish families from that street were forcibly transferred to a large ghetto in Tarnow where the Nazis needed them as forced-laborers for their factories, some 50 miles to the east. She offered him water, bread and cheese which he gratefully accepted, before she urged him to find a place to hide away from the city.

My father left hurriedly, but instead of heading away from the city he went to a nearby more affluent neighborhood where his Aunt Sarah lived. Inconspicuously he observed Aunt Sarah's house from across the street for a while and was shocked to see that the house was occupied by SS officers and there was no sign of his aunt. Utterly despondent he tracked back to the rail depot where after several hours he hopped on a freight train headed east to Tarnow. There he jumped off the train and found his way to the Jewish ghetto.

## **The Tarnow Ghetto**

It was evening in the ghetto, where by December 1940 the Germans had already forcibly relocated and confined more than 30,000 Jews. The streets were busy with people returning from another hard day of forced-labor work. After several inquiries, he located a small, dilapidated house where to his delight and astonishment he found his parents, sister, and Aunt Sarah living together with two other families. The family reunion was heartwarming, as my grandparents and aunt thought they would never see my father again. They were overwhelmed by joy in spite of their appalling circumstances. During the next several months my father settled in with his family at the time when the Nazis continued to relocate area Jews to the ghetto which they officially established in March 1941 after they had completed the tall barbed wire fences to encircle it.

In June 1941 there were about 40,000 forcibly-relocated Jews living in the small ghetto area, most of whom were working in forced-labor assignments imposed by the brutal SS troops who oversaw the ghetto. A year later, in June 1942, a group of Gestapo officers arrived and issued papers to most of the Jews in the Tarnow Ghetto. The papers were stamped with either "SD" for those who were working in forced-labor assignments useful for the Nazi's war effort, or with "K" for others who were too old or weak to work.

The Forschner family members were among those whose forced-labor assignments were deemed useful for the Nazis. My father's sister Esther, and his aunt Sarah worked as seamstresses in a factory that made uniforms for the *Wermacht*, just next door to another *Wermacht*-supply factory owned by Oscar Schindler. My grandmother Chaya often fell sick and couldn't join her work assignment so she hid during those days, while my father and my grandfather were sent with other forced-labor groups for hard work at a large farming estate of Baron Konopka that provided farm goods to the *Wermacht*.

It was late summer 1942 when the family received a message that my great-grandfather, Neftali Forschner was gravely ill and was unable to get any medical treatment. Upon learning that, my grandfather Abraham escaped from the Tarnow Ghetto and made his way on foot to Dabrowa Tarnowska, some twelve miles to the north in order to try and help his father. He soon arrived at the small Dabrowa Tarnowska Ghetto, and found his father incapacitated and near death. However, my great-grandfather was insistent that his son not stay with him and instead flee for his life, until my grandfather reluctantly agreed and left the ghetto at night.

My grandfather walked to a farm about two miles away where the local farmer was a business acquaintance. There, he approached the farmer and begged for help. The farmer first refused to consider my grandfather's desperate plea, but changed his mind and agreed to hide him on his farm after my grandfather offered him all his money and valuables. That was the last that anyone in the Forschner family had heard from my grandfather Abraham.

## **The Final Escape**

Meanwhile, during that excruciatingly difficult year at the Tarnow Ghetto, the remaining Forschner family members somehow survived the *Aktionen* of summer and fall of 1942 in which most of the ghetto Jews were sent to their death at the Belzec extermination camp. Many others, including children and elderly, were rounded up and transported to a nearby forest where they were shot.

My grandmother Chaya realized that the only one of the remaining family members who had the strength and courage to escape was her youngest, my father, 19 years old then. "You must escape and hide, it is the only chance you will have," she told my reluctant father. In late December 1942 the family gathered their last hidden money and valuables, and prepared a bag with food and clothing. Then, as he was ready to leave, they all huddled around my father in a desperate hug, everyone weeping.

It was a moonless December night as my father escaped the mostly dark ghetto through one of the holes in the barbed wire fence, avoiding the SS patrol. He then entered a forested path to the northeast and assumed the posture and manners of a Polish farm hand as he was already accustomed to from his previous covert travels. Hiding during the days, my father walked the next few nights, following a path into the forested area which he remembered from his childhood.

The triangular shaped area of about 200 square miles consisted of several hilly ridges covered by thick forests. The area was interconnected by dirt roads passing through agricultural valleys, stretching from Tarnow in the south to the villages of Radomyśl Wielki in the northeast and Szczecin in the northwest, respectively. There my father hid in the heavily forested areas where on occasion he cautiously joined other hiding refugees and then a resistance group he encountered, somehow surviving the winter of 1943. Life on the run became somewhat easier for the refugees in the spring and summer as they were able to wage raids into fields and barns of local villages and steal food before dispersing again.

In late summer 1943 the Nazis stepped up their efforts to locate and kill such groups of refugees and partisans east of Krakow and offered rewards to any locals who could provide useful information. At that time my father joined a group of other ragtag refugees when one day they were spotted by a Polish farmer who informed the Germans about their hiding location. They were soon attacked by a *Wermacht* unit that tried to surround the group, opening heavy fire on the refugees who were scattering to all directions.

As he was escaping into deep forest cover my father was spotted by a German soldier who gave chase, emptying his rifle at my father, then pulling out his pistol and firing indiscriminately. Luckily for my father, the range was too far for pistol fire, and he succeeded in reaching deeper into the thick forest. However, my father quickly realized that he was hit in his right arm as he felt increasing pain and saw the blood soaking his sleeve.

Alone and scared, my father kept running until it seemed safe enough to stop. He found a fallen tree trunk to sit on, catching his breath. Then after a while, assured that no one was around, my father held his breath, biting his teeth together, as he used his left hand to slowly remove his jacket, shirt and undershirt. He was shaking from the excruciating pain every time he touched his throbbing injured arm until, finally, he was able to look at the wound. To his relief, it appeared that the slug cleanly tore through only skin and muscle without shattering any bones, and the bleeding seemed to slow down. There was a small creek flowing at the toe of the hill and he carefully moved towards the water and washed his wound.

He then tore his long-sleeve undershirt with his teeth pulling it apart with his left hand, and used the pieces to dress the wound the best he could. Fighting the pain, he put the shirt and jacket back on, except for his dangling right arm. Then he used remaining pieces of the torn undershirt to make an improvised sling in which he rested his arm, bent to the least painful position. He was hopeful that wrapped with the shirt and jacket he could protect himself from the night chill, but he knew that he needed to seek help soon.

Injured and weak, he was walking slowly at night in a northeasterly direction towards Radomyśl Wielki. When hiding during the day, he ate wild berries that were still abundant in the forest and drank fresh water from the creeks. Finally, after three days, he climbed to the top of a high hill, from where he recognized his location to be near a familiar dirt road meandering in the valley below. He then made his way in the evening to a large farm he knew well, some six miles northeast of Dabrowa Tarnowska, where he used to accompany his father on trips to buy produce for the store. The farm owner, a righteous Pole who despised the Nazis, recognized my father and offered to hide him on the farm, taking a mortal risk doing so.

As my father soon found out to his utter astonishment, in early March of 1943 the farmer had already taken in two other Forschner family relatives, Rena and Moshe Haber, who arrived at the farm after they left behind a large, successful restaurant in Krakow, escaping just prior to the SS roundups and liquidation of the Krakow Ghetto. My father was happy to share his hideout with his relatives who had money with them and insisted that their savior, the righteous farmer, take their money to help defray the costs of hiding and providing for them. During the summer of 1943 after he took in the Habers, the farmer had built an improvised bunker into a heavily forested hillside on the farm where the three refugees were then hiding. Several weeks after his arrival on the farm my father recovered from his injury, except for the scar forever left on his arm.

The three refugees also helped the farmer with certain chores in early morning and late evening hours when they could remain unnoticeable to any outsiders. For the righteous farmer and his three hidden refugees, every day was tenuous as they knew that one small mistake, one little slip, would cost them their lives.

The righteous farmer was also the bearer of news to my father about the fate of his remaining family members, and it was all horrific. On a late summer day in 1943, the farmer approached my father and huddled with him in the bunker, his face ashen, as he told my father in a crackling voice that his father, my grandfather Abraham, was betrayed by the farmer who had hid him.

That other farmer reported my grandfather to the German authorities, and the SS arrived. They interrogated my grandfather on the whereabouts of any other hiding family members, and when he refused to provide any information an SS officer coldly took out his pistol and shot my grandfather in the back of the head.

Later, in November of 1943, the farmer told my father that the Tarnow Ghetto had been liquidated and that my grandmother Chaya, Aunt Esther, and great Aunt Sarah were forcibly transported by rail to Auschwitz. During the ensuing months the farmer reported to his hiding refugees about the German defeats in the east and the advances of the Soviet army. In late 1944 they could all hear the heavy artillery and air bombardments of the advancing Soviets pushing the retreating Nazis back towards the west. This encouraged my father who was still inconsolable with grief, but became determined to survive the war and search for the family's fate for himself.

When we visited Dabrowa Tarnowska with my father in 2004, he tried to recall the name of the righteous Polish farmer that saved his life and we spent time at the town cemetery looking, to no avail, for a possible tombstone of the saintly man who my father could only remember as Yanek.

The Krakow area was finally liberated by the Soviet army in January 1945 and the three refugees came out of hiding and returned to Krakow where my father found out that his mother and sister perished at the murderous hands of the Nazis. However, he did receive some bitter-sweet news that his Aunt Sarah was miraculously saved by a Red Cross delegation from Sweden that the Nazis allowed to visit the Auschwitz prison clinic in early January 1945, as the Soviet army was closing in.

While preparing for Germany's fast approaching defeat, the Nazis were desperately trying to cover their horrific war crimes and atrocities. That highly controlled visit by the Swedish Red Cross delegation to the Auschwitz clinic was attempted Nazi propaganda. The visit was a well-staged effort by the Nazis to show neutral Sweden that they were treating Auschwitz prisoners humanely. All the while during the Swedish Red Cross visit at the clinic, the Nazis were trying, unsuccessfully, to dynamite and raze the Auschwitz gas chambers and crematoria, about one third of a mile away where until a few weeks before that visit they had been working non-stop, murdering thousands of Jewish prisoners every day. The delegation met several very ill patients including my great Aunt Sarah who impressed them by her beauty and fluency in German when articulating for them that she and the other patients at that clinic were unable to get proper treatment at Auschwitz and would likely not survive.

As a gesture of good will, the Nazis allowed the Swedish delegation to transport several patients including my great Aunt Sarah back with them to Sweden for treatment. The Nazis assured that their humane gesture would be well recorded in the propaganda film they prepared to cover the event.

### **Liquidation of the Kovno Ghetto**

Some 400 miles northeast to where my father was hiding since the summer of 1943, flames of the Nazi inferno engulfed the remaining members of the Perski family at the Kovno Ghetto. It was early July 1944 when the Soviet army was smashing the remaining *Wermacht* units around Vilnius, and was ready to take over the capital city of Lithuania, some sixty miles east of the Kovno Ghetto. On the night of July 7, 1944, the notorious murderer, SS Commandant Wilhelm Göcke, who was in charge of the Kovno Ghetto, received an urgent order to complete the ghetto evacuation the next day and demolish it to the ground. The next morning on Saturday, July 8, 1944, SS units violently rounded all remaining Jews they could find in the dilapidated houses, rushing them to the train depot where they were quickly selected and pushed into waiting cattle cars. There was an estimated total of about 2,500 people, among whom were the Perski family.



**Final Liquidation of the Kovno Ghetto, July 8, 1944**

Chaim, my grandfather, who refused to be separated from his three children was badly beaten and dragged into a train designated for the Dachau concentration camp, while Aunt Libby, my mother Sarah, and my uncle Isaac year were jostled into the mass of women and children, then crammed into the cattle cars designated for the Stutthof concentration camp, near Gdansk, Poland, on the Baltic coast. They were utterly terrified with the morbid realization that they would not see their father ever again.

When the trains left, Göcke assigned most of his SS troops to raze the ghetto to the ground with grenades and dynamite, while he positioned others in a perimeter around the burning ghetto to shoot those trying to escape. It is estimated that as many as 2,000 people burned to death or were shot while trying to escape the inferno. About three weeks later, on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1944, the Soviet army arrived at the burned-down ghetto where they found some 500 Jewish survivors, most of whom had escaped to the nearby forest and others who had been hiding in a deep bunker that was not discovered by the SS.

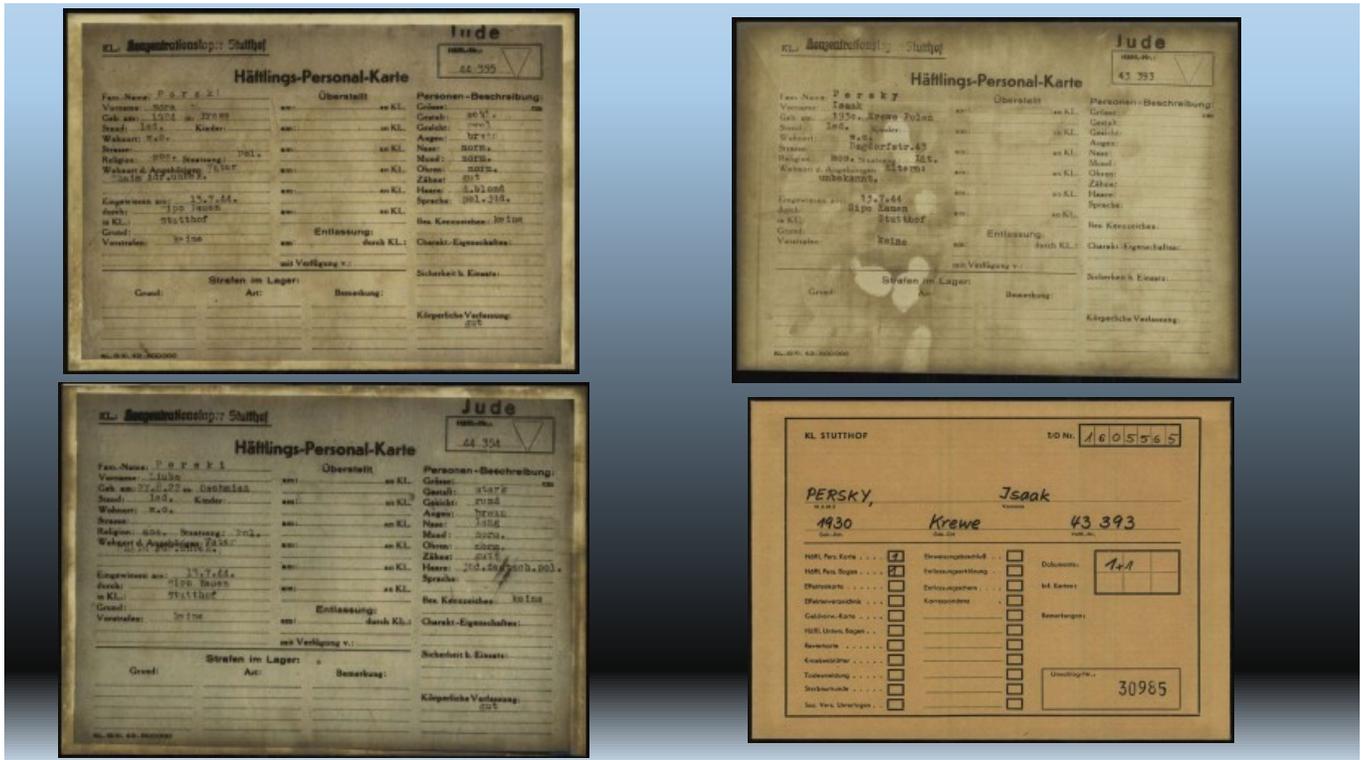
The mass murderer, SS Commandant Wilhelm Göcke was killed about two months later, in October 1944, in a partisan ambush when the *Waffen-SS* were conducting anti-partisan activity in large forested area some 200 km to the southwest.

## **Voyage to Stutthof**

The treacherous train journey of the three siblings from Kovno to the Stutthof Concentration Camp covered a distance of about 300 miles and took six days due to Soviet air force bombardments of rail facilities. Some died during those terrible days in the densely packed cattle cars, suffocating in the oppressive heat. Sleep was near impossible as there was no privacy or space for the prisoners who were packed in, bodies squeezed into one another with little moving room. There were no toilets, only a few buckets in each car. The train did stop a few times to dump the dead and to provide the living with water and meager rations of stale bread. Unlike some of the other passengers who were relieved to have survived the trip, the three Perski siblings, especially Aunt Libby, disembarked the train with dreadful anticipation of the uncertain horrors awaiting them when they arrived at Stutthof on July 13, 1944.

The Nazis were meticulous about their paperwork and had kept organized records on the transport and imprisonment of Jews. From 1944 to the end of the war, as Nazi Germany was being defeated and their forces pushed back at all fronts, they made tremendous efforts to

destroy evidence of the atrocities they committed. However, volumes of Nazi documents had survived and were captured by the Allied forces.



**Entry Registration Documents of the Perski Siblings at Stutthof, July 13, 1944**

The Holocaust Museum in Washington DC has many of these significant documents, or copies thereof. It was there that entry registry documents of my mother, aunt and uncle from the Stutthof Concentration Camp were discovered. Those documents are among other documents which were discovered about other family members that were murdered by the Nazis.

The Stutthof registration documents reveal the horrific gamble that the three terrified siblings had to make in an attempt to try and circumvent the Nazi murder machine and prolong their improbable survival chances. Both Isaac and my mother, with the urging of my Aunt Libby lied about their ages so that they were classified in what they conceived to be a group that is not destined for immediate execution. The registration documents show that both my mother and Isaac provided a fake birth-year where Isaac who was 18 years old, was listed as 14, and my mother who was 14 years old, was listed as 19. The morbid logic for their age selection, was based on their hopes that the Nazis would classify Isaac for placement in a group of similar size

adolescents, and my mother with other young women, and that both groups would be deemed capable of some work and given a reprieve to continue living.

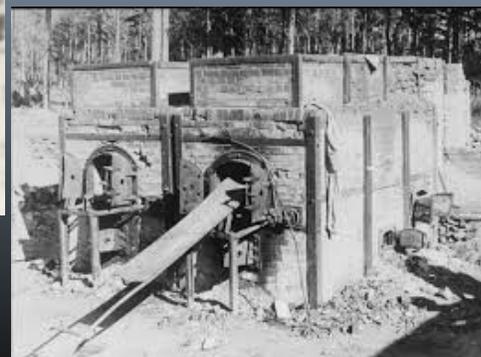
Moments later, after the entry registration, *Waffen-SS* were roughly performing selection of the new arrivals into several lines, among which there appeared to be two lines where Isaac could see some boys and adolescents. He was intensely observing the selection proceedings ahead. Isaac was always smaller for his age, and arrived at Stutthof emaciated and frail, looking even smaller and weaker than before. Seeing the selection process just paces ahead of him, he noticed one line of mothers with toddlers, younger children, and some weak and sick-looking adolescents, while another line included adolescent boys with a stronger appearance. He deduced that the latter group would be chosen for labor and thus inferred that he may be doomed because he would be classified as too weak for work and likely be sent to the line condemned for execution.

With that fatal conclusion, Isaac inconspicuously took off his boots and gave them to my mother whose shoes were completely worn out, while he put on her torn shoes with his toes sticking out. Aided by Isaac's thick boot heels, my mother then summoned all her strength to look taller since she wanted to stay together with Aunt Libby and be considered as a young woman capable of forced-labor chores.



Stutthof Concentration Camp (1944 – 1945)

Stutthof cremation ovens: photo taken by the Soviet army who liberated the camp, May 9, 1945



Soon the three Perski siblings' turn came as they found themselves in front of the SS-*Scharführer* in charge of the selection who yelled in German "Mothers and their children on the right and everyone else to the left". Aunt Libby was desperately holding Isaac's hand as they were both directed to the right when Isaac realized that the right-side line was the one likely condemned for execution. He then stopped and faced an agitated *Waffen-SS* soldier blurting words in rudimentary German and pointing at Aunt Libby, saying that she is not his mother, and that she was supposed to join the left-side line, where he saw able-bodied prisoners lined up. In response, the guard roughly pushed Isaac to the right-side line and directed Aunt Libby to the left where my mother was standing, wearing Isaac's boots, trembling in terror.

The two sisters never saw Isaac again. Aunt Libby later found out that the SS guards determined Isaac to be too weak to work and pushed him into the camp's gas chamber, where he was gassed along with other weak and sick prisoners, their bodies then cremated.

### **The Murder of Chaim Perski**

On July 8, 1944, during the Kovno Ghetto liquidation, after being badly beaten, my grandfather Chaim was jostled into a cattle car of a train that brought him to the Dacahu Concentration Camp near Munich, Germany. In 1996 it was discovered through the Red Cross that he arrived in Dachau and survived his injuries from the beating. The documents show that later, on October 25, 1944 he was transferred from Dachau to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp where he was murdered in the gas chambers, about 60 years old, his body cremated.

### **Surviving Stutthof**

At the Stutthof Concentration Camp, during the days, Aunt Libby was separated from my mother and sent to a work group, whereas my mother, who was often too sick to work, stayed behind at the camp where she was forced to perform menial chores. Aunt Libby was sent with her group to dig trenches for the *Wermacht* in preparation for battle with the advancing Soviet army in the east.

On the bitterly cold Christmas Day of 1944, Aunt Libby's work group was sent out to work on new trenches, when they realized in the afternoon that their guards were gone. It was getting dark, and they were hungry, bone-tired, and cold. No one thought about trying to escape as they were not familiar with the area, knowing only where the road back to their camp barracks was,

and they also were well aware of the immediate death awaiting them when they would surely be captured by the *Waffen-SS* search squads and their dogs, if they tried to escape.

When they started walking back, they noticed a large, well-lit farm-house nearby. The group decided that they would walk the short distance to the farm-house to see if they could beg for some food. Because of her language skills, the group decided in hushed voices that Aunt Libby should speak for them with the farmers. At the front porch, Aunt Libby gathered her courage and knocked on the heavy wooden door. There they all stood on the wooden porch, an odd assembly of some twenty women in rags, emaciated down to skin and bones, shivering in the cold, and holding a variety of digging tools, when the door was opened.

They saw a family of a dozen people including several children, in the midst of Christmas celebration, gathered around a large wooden table laden with all sorts of food which they had not seen since their imprisonment by the Nazis. Aunt Libby, usually talkative, just stood there speechless, her hazel eyes tearing at the celebration in front of her. She was overwhelmed as were the other women in her group who were gasping behind her at the surreal sight. They could not believe that in the midst of the war inferno and their improbable existence in hell, some people still lived and celebrated Christmas like that.

After the initial shock, Aunt Libby explained in fluent Polish who they were and what they were doing there. The farmer and his wife stood at the door, uninviting, appearing surprised by Aunt Libby's account, saying that they were not even aware of what was going on in Stutthof or that it was a concentration camp. With the farmer standing at the door, his wife said that she would gather some food and clothing as she turned back into the warm house. After several minutes which seemed like an eternity to the shivering women outside, she returned with two bags, one with food and the other with clothing for the women to take back to the camp. Then the farmer and his wife went back inside and abruptly closed the door in front of Aunt Libby.

There was chaos as the women fought over the bags to grab what they could. Aunt Libby, who secured two uncooked potatoes and some bread from the food bag, was also able to find a scarf and sweater for my mother in the other bag, which she thought would be most useful in their cold barracks, as my mother was often sick.

After more than an hour of walking in the dark, when the women returned to their barracks, they were swarmed by other desperate barrack prisoners who heard of their earlier whereabouts. It was a fight for survival as the women were reluctantly forced to give up some of the meager food and clothes they brought from the farm to a number of aggressive barrack mates, in order to fend them off.

Aunt Libby managed to give the scarf and sweater to my mother, and they slowly ate the bread together on their bunk. She then tried to hide the two uncooked potatoes - her treasure trove, under her pillow, only to find out the next day that the potatoes were stolen while she was at work.

With the Soviet army's rapid advance, the evacuation of prisoners from the Stutthof camp began in January 1945, when there were about 45,000 surviving prisoners in the Stutthof camp and sub-camps, the overwhelming majority of them Jews.

*SS-Oberscharführer* Johann Pauls, the Stutthof camp commandant, was under strict orders and pressure from his superiors to liquidate the camp as soon as possible. In his planning he relied on a few close aides including Irmgard Furchner who, although she was only 19 years old, proved particularly efficient in organizing the mass killing Pauls desired for his camp liquidation plans. Executing one of those plans, about 5,000 of the Stutthof surviving prisoners were marched to the nearby Baltic Sea coast, forced into the freezing water, and machine-gunned.

It was the middle of winter 1945. As the SS was hastily preparing for the final evacuation of the rest of the prisoners, Pauls ordered his guards to begin mass marches of prisoners towards a destination in northeastern Germany, in what was known as the Death Marches. It is estimated that about 20,000 prisoners were murdered or died from weakness, starvation, sickness and the brutal cold during the marches from Stutthof.



My mother and aunt were forced into a group of some 10,000 prisoners ordered to march on foot in the direction of Lauenburg in eastern Germany. Before the march, SS guards systematically shot anyone they deemed unfit to walk. Then, during the march, only about one half of the prisoners survived. Anyone who stumbled or stopped during the horrific seven-day march was immediately shot and many just collapsed and died during the scarce rest stops along the way.

In one of our conversations during the 1990s Aunt Libby recalled that on the eighth day of the march my mother was very sick and couldn't continue, she just wanted to stop and sit on the snow awaiting a certain death, but a *Wermacht* soldier came up to her and said "Do not to give up now, we are almost there," and indeed they arrived at a makeshift camp east of Lauenburg that evening - against all odds, the two sisters survived the brutal 90 miles Death March.

Without exception the survivors were sick and emaciated; my mother's condition became especially acute, as several weeks passed. Then, on a rainy spring morning in early May, the prisoners woke up to find that the guards had left the camp and they were alone. They did not know that Nazi Germany had just surrendered unconditionally to the allies.

A few more desperate rainy days followed. Aunt Libby moved my sick mother to one of the abandoned barns adjacent to the camp with a group of other women survivors to take shelter from the unrelenting rain. Then, one day in the late evening hours, it was dark outside when the women heard a heavy vehicle come to a stop next to the barn, and the sounds of men shouting in Russian. They were soldiers of an advance scout platoon of the Soviet army which arrived at the camp area and located the surviving women sheltered in the barn. The battle-weary, heavily armed soldiers were all rough-looking, unshaven and unkempt and most appeared quite drunk as they piled into the barn gazing with unmitigated animal desire at the helpless, horrified women.

Fluent in Russian Aunt Libby quickly realized that the soldiers were going to rape them, but she also surmised that they were still arguing what woman each wanted first. She knew she had a single small opening to try and mitigate the pending assault, and she stood up facing the one who appeared to be in command. Shivering in fear and weakness, she summoned her remaining strength and explained to him in fluent Russian that the group had isolated in the barn because they were severely ill with typhoid, and they did not want to infect the other survivors at the camp. The man looked at her emaciated form and shifted his gaze around the other sick-

looking women, then reluctantly ordered the other soldiers to quickly evacuate the barn despite their drunken protestations.

A few days later, on Tuesday, May 15, 1945, it was especially warm and sunny when a large Soviet army unit with tanks and trucks rolled into the area and liberated the camp. The Soviets then arranged to provide food, supplies and medical treatment for the survivors, most of whom were mere skeletons, and many, like my mother, near death.

Johann Pauls, the murderer camp commandant received his due punishment in a relatively quick manner. He was captured shortly afterwards by the Soviet army and a year later he was tried in the first Stutthof Trial by the Soviet/Polish Special Criminal Court, which was held in Gdańsk in April and May 1946. He was convicted of war crimes, along with 10 other accused guards, five men and five women, all sentenced to death and then executed in public hanging on July 4, 1946.

In 2018, then 94-year-old Johann Rehbogen was charged by a German court in Berlin with having been an SS guard at the Stutthof concentration camp where he joined the SS as a teenager in 1942. The court accused him of aiding and abetting in the murder of many hundreds of prisoners, including several hundred Jewish prisoners executed in summer 1944 by gassing because they were deemed unfit for work, and the shooting of about 180 Polish and Russian prisoners of war. Rehbogen, who appeared in court in a wheelchair, denied, through his attorney's statement, knowing the extent of the atrocities committed. The trial had been suspended after Rehbogen was hospitalized with health problems and had not resumed since.

Wanted for war crimes and atrocities, the German authorities had been looking for Irmgard Furchner, Pauls' dedicated aide, for many decades after the war. She was finally identified and captured in 2021, at the age of 96. Her trial for her role as an accessory to 11,387 murders of mostly Jewish prisoners, started in Germany at the end of September 2021, in the German town of Itzehoe. She was being tried in Juvenile Court since she had been an adolescent (about 19 years old) at the time of her crimes.

## In Memoriam

*My mother and father survived their passage through the Nazi hell against all odds. However, the war which was over in Europe on May 8, 1945 took a horrific toll on their families as most of their closest family members had perished. May their memories be honored and blessed forever.*



*My mother's family members who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators:*

|  |             |
|--|-------------|
| <i>My grandma Ester Perski:</i>                          | <i>1943</i> |
| <i>My grandpa Chaim Perski:</i>                          | <i>1944</i> |
| <i>My aunt Chana Perski:</i>                             | <i>1943</i> |
| <i>My aunt Ita Perski:</i>                               | <i>1943</i> |
| <i>My uncle Isaac Perski:</i>                            | <i>1944</i> |
| <i>My Milikowsky relatives Gershon, Noah, and Judah:</i> | <i>1942</i> |

*And, my father's family members who were murdered by the Nazis:*

|                                      |             |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>My grandpa Abraham Forschner:</i> | <i>1943</i> |
| <i>My grandma Chaya Forschner:</i>   | <i>1944</i> |
| <i>My aunt Ester Forschner:</i>      | <i>1944</i> |

## **Dawn for the Perski Sisters**

After their rescue by the Soviet army, they were taken to a large hospital set up to treat camp survivors. The doctors said my mother would not survive, but my Aunt Libby, did not accept that and continued to care for her sister. She continued to defy the doctors' expectations for the three years that followed until she recovered. In spring 1948 Aunt Libby met Sholim, another Holocaust survivor. They fell in love and got married shortly afterwards. After their wedding they moved to Bialystok, Poland, where my mother joined them. My mother was taking classes at a local college and joined a group of other lone Holocaust survivors who were preparing to immigrate to the new state of Israel, which she did in early 1950.



**Three survivors in Bialystok, summer 1948 - left to right: Libby, Sholim, and my mother**

In the meantime, my aunt and her husband lived and worked in Bialystok, and both of their children, my cousins, were born in Poland. They eventually applied for immigration visas to the US but were queued in a long waiting list of holocaust survivors as immigration was subject to strict quotas. Several years passed before they were finally granted visas and immigrated to Baltimore in 1960.

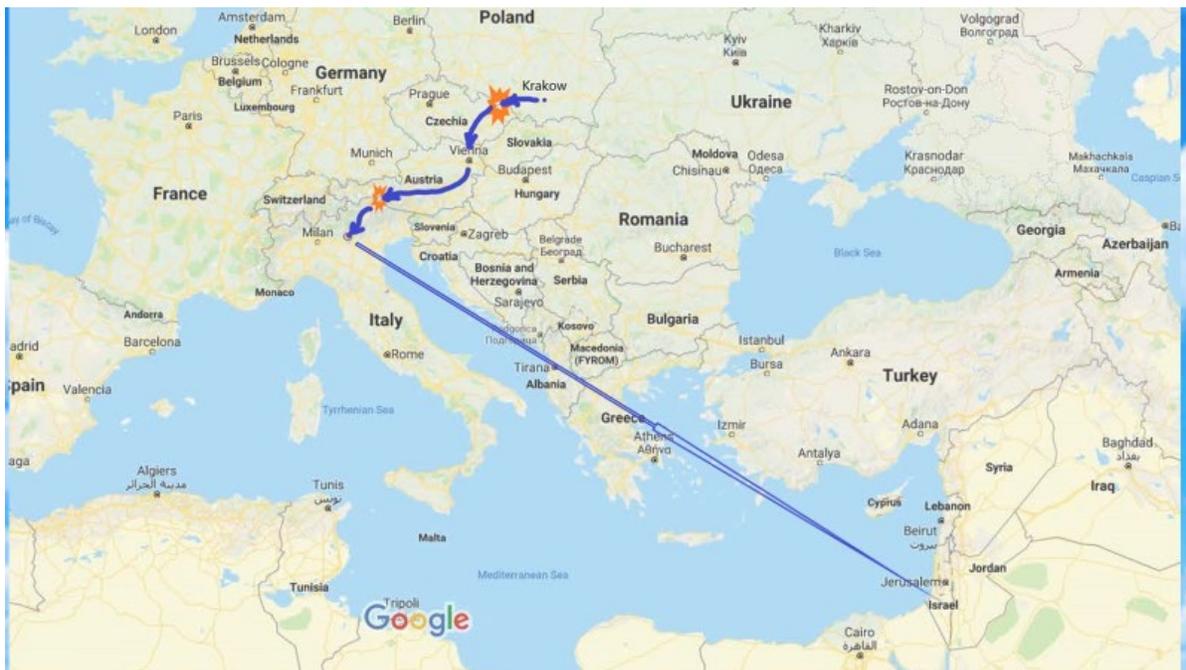
## My Father's Passage to Hope

After the war, in late 1945 my father returned to Krakow where no other family member had survived. There, he completed his technical education and was working as a skilled machinist.

In the fall of 1946, my uncle Moshe suddenly appeared in Krakow and the two brothers who lost each other in Holocaust mayhem had an incredibly emotional reunion. Moshe's Russian wife had died during the war in Russia, and he returned to Krakow to find that his brother was the other lone family survivor.

They both joined a group of survivors who had also lost their families in the Holocaust and were determined to immigrate to Palestine, then under British rule. The British had effectively banned immigration of Holocaust survivors to Palestine and were not issuing any visas. Their group received support from the American Jewish Distribution Committee (Joint) that also sponsored educational activities and Hebrew studies.

In winter 1947, after short preparations, their group of about 20 headed out of Krakow to embark on a difficult trip to Italy, where a large camp that prepared Holocaust survivors for immigration to the soon-to-be-declared state of Israel was established by the Joint and the Jewish Agency for Israel. Little did they know about what was going to await them on their challenging journey of some 700 miles from Poland to Italy.



**My Father's Journey from Poland to Israel, January 1947 – June 1948**

When possible they traveled by truck, but because they did not have proper documents to enter the Czech Republic north of Ostrava, they had to covertly walk through the night bypassing the guarded Ostrava border checkpoint to a location south of the border where they met another truck. Fortunately, the next crossing from the Czech Republic into Austria, north of Katzelsdorf went more smoothly, as the border guards looked the other way with some money changing hands.



**Crossing from the Czech Republic into Austria, Winter 1947**

However, their biggest obstacle was at their next border crossings from Austria into Italy which was heavily guarded on the Italian side at Resia. Arriving at the Italian border area in the midst of winter 1947, they had to walk about 10 miles at night, in thick snow, on high altitude of the lower eastern Alps in an attempt to circumvent the Italian border checkpoint. They were however, caught by an Italian border patrol who detained them at the border crossing camp arranging to deport them back to Austria. It was their second day in detention at the Italian border station when luck turned their side. A long convoy of cement-laden trucks which were traveling from Austria to Italy had to stop at the checkpoint for the night.

The group seized the opportunity, and in a daring late-night escape they crawled towards the trucks and hid in the covered cargo beds among the cement bags, just before the trucks began moving again at dawn. And so, they entered Italy and successfully reached their destination.

The group settled in a large estate in northern Italy, east of Milan, rented by the Joint for the purpose of training and preparing survivors for their pending travel to what was to become the new state of Israel. It was summer of 1947 when my father's group completed their training and were enjoying their stay in Italy, although they were all itching to get to Israel.



**My father in training camp near Milan, Italy, summer 1947**

With the British-imposed strict immigration ban on Holocaust survivors, my father's group had to wait in Italy another year until after the British Mandate ended on May 14, 1948. The same day, the State of Israel declared its independence, and immediately came under overwhelming Arab attack from all borders. Among its activities to defend the newly declared state, Israel then also started arranging for air transport of survivors, with priority for young male survivors in military service age, like my father's group.

In early June 1948, my father's group had finally traveled from Italy by air and arrived in Israel, leaving behind the ashes that remained from their previous lives in Europe.

Immediately upon arrival in Israel in June 1948, my father's group joined the newly formed Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), to help defend Israel from the overwhelming Arab attacks during Israel's Independence War, which the Holocaust survivors deemed as the survival war of the Jewish people. My father was assigned to the Carmeli Brigade as an infantry machine-gunner and took part in fierce battles in the lower Galilee.



**My father with the IDF's Carmeli Brigade, Lower Galilei, Israel, July 1948**

During that war, in mid-July 1948, immediately after the first truce collapsed due to Arab attacks, my father's company was holding defensive positions near the village of Al Birwa some 6.5 miles east of Acre when they were surprised by an intense night attack of Arab Liberation Army troops that arrived from Nazareth. In the ensuing battle his company suffered heavy casualties with many dead and seriously wounded, fighting until dawn when reinforcements arrived and launched a counterattack.

Although my father was not physically wounded in the bloody battle, he was in deep shock, and afterwards received treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder. He then was relieved from further combat duties and was honorably discharged from active IDF duty in early

spring of 1950. My father continued to serve in the IDF Reserves for the years that followed and took part in both the Sinai War of 1956 and the Six Days War in 1967 before his final discharge from IDF Reserves.

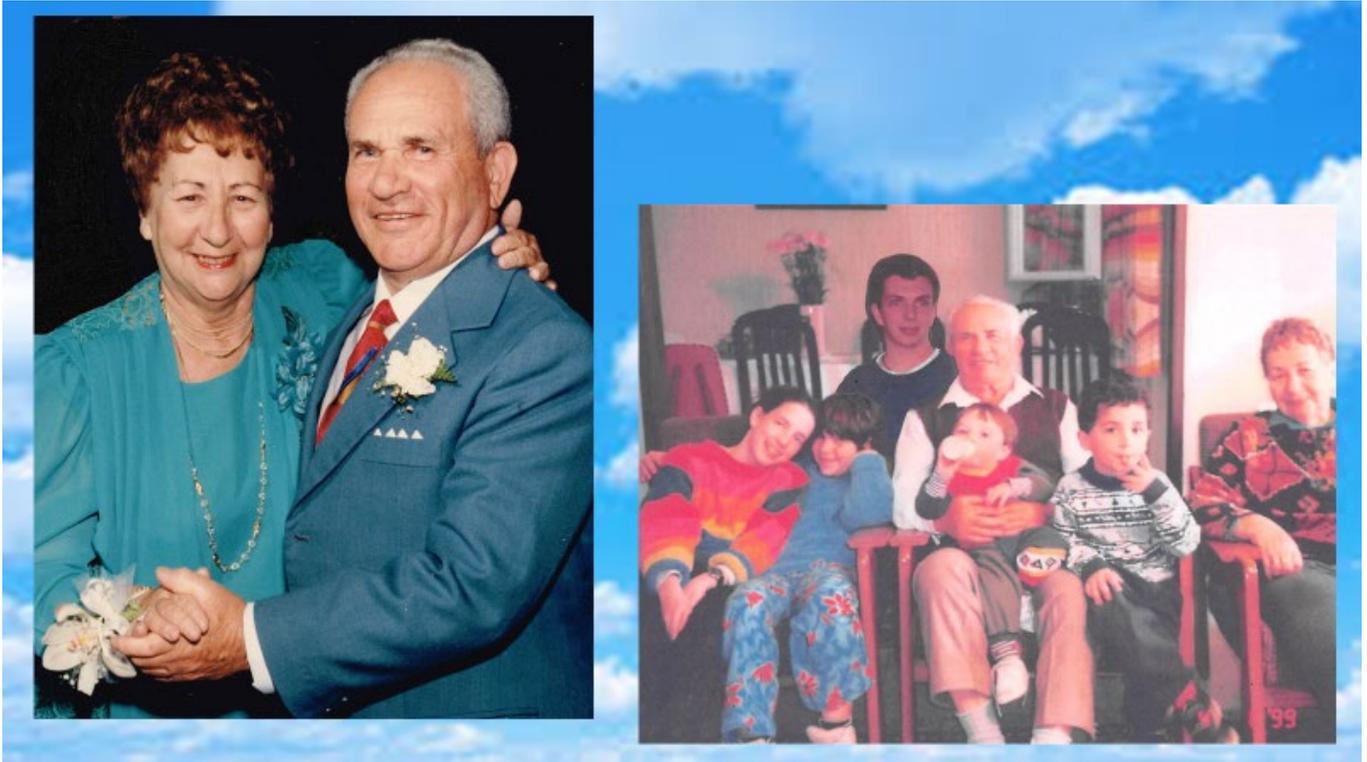
My mother who had emigrated from Poland to Israel in early 1950 with her group of Holocaust survivors, was living in Haifa sharing a small rented apartment with another woman acquaintance from that group.

Following his discharge from the IDF, my father also settled in Haifa, where on June 12, 1950 he went on a first date with my mother at the beachfront resort of Bat Galim, after which they stayed together for the 50 years that followed. The two Holocaust survivors got engaged in November 1950. They were married on January 2, 1951 leading a quiet life in a suburb of Haifa raising my younger sister, Chaya, and me.



**My parents in Israel - left to right: Engaged in Nov 1950; Wedding Day Jan 2, 1951; at their Haifa suburb apartment with my sister and me, summer 1956.**

Their life together was not easy, as life in Israel had never been easy– and still is not, but they were happy and never missed an opportunity to celebrate with family and friends, even when struggling with health problems in their later years. They greatly cherished their five grandchildren (my three sons and two nieces) and showered them with love and support as they were growing up.



**My Parents: Left – still dancing after 44 years of togetherness; Right – with their five cherished grandchildren in early 1999.**

On June 12, 2000 my mother passed away in a hospital room in Haifa overlooking the same beachfront where exactly 50 years before she first met my father. My father passed away in Israel in 2012 at nearly 90 years of age. Their memories will be forever blessed.

## Epilogue

I am enormously grateful for the heartfelt encouragement, support and comments provided by my cousin Esther (Aunt's Libby's daughter) and my sister Chaya who had also accompanied me to some of the visits in eastern Europe. Their contributions were absolutely essential as I weaved the difficult accounts by Aunt Libby and my parents, often emotional and painful for them to recall. Writing this, I resorted to limited literary bridging of certain anecdotal accounts of Aunt Libby and my parents, especially where I encountered inconsistencies of dates and locations. The product of those efforts is the concise story you have just read, describing my parents' passage through hell, and their miraculous emergence to love and hope.

I believe that it is my responsibility and moral duty to tell my parents' story, and I find it of utmost importance, when such opportunities arise, to speak publicly about the Holocaust, at schools and other organizations, engaging those willing to listen and learn.

In the past, actual survivors of the Holocaust would speak publicly about their incredible personal experiences, but today most of these survivors like my parents and Aunt Libby have passed away, or are too old and frail for public events. So now it is up to us, the children of Holocaust survivors – the second generation ("G-2" as we call ourselves), to continue and publicly speak and educate about the Holocaust.

Many references were used for this story. Some of the photos shown are from our scarce family collection that survived the Holocaust and the years since then. Others are copied from publicly available sources, and while among them there might be some that could be copyright-protected, they are used herewith solely for educational purposes with no-commercial value.

In closing, as the reader of this incredible Holocaust survival account of my parents, you have just become a witness to the worst mass atrocities that man had ever unleashed on fellow man. As such, I hope that this story will encourage you to take an active stand against evil when you recognize it in its many horrendous forms such as racism, Anti-Semitism, discrimination, and hate. You must remember that our individual and collective stand against such evil is the only hope that the future of humanity may have.