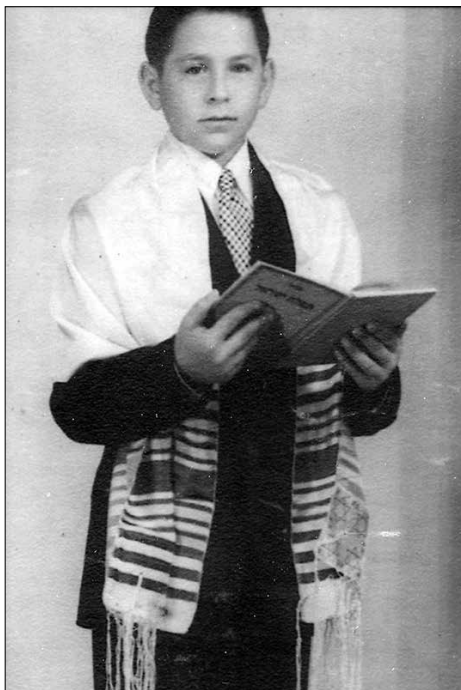


MY SURVIVAL IN POLAND

By Salomon (Shloime) Fachler

Translated from the original Spanish by Daniel Fachler, Salomon's grandson



Salomon Fachler at his Bar Mitzvah.

I was born on February 25, 1932 in Ostrowiec Kielce, Poland, to Miriam Beile and Mayer Fachler, who owned a kosher butcher shop. My mother suffered from postpartum pneumonia and died three months after my birth. I had six older siblings: Shmuel, Yankel, Szulim, Shimshon, Rachmiel and Rivka, a baby who died before I was born. After my mother's death, her sister Elke helped raise my brothers and me. My aunt's husband Ber Glatt left for America in pursuit of a more prosperous and stable life, but my aunt had refused to leave with him, because she did not want to leave me alone.

By the end of 1939, the German army invaded my hometown. After they gained control of our city, the first item on the Nazis' agenda was to establish a ghetto. One day, in April 1941, they marched through our town, announcing from loudspeakers that all Jews were to gather in the main plaza. I remember throngs of people assembled in that place, including my family. The Nazis immediately determined our lot: some were sent to ghettos, others to the concentration camp, and many were shot on the spot.

I was able to hide, along with my cousin Chanke Gutwil, who was around my age. We succeeded in reaching the limits of town when Chanke cried and caught the attention of some Nazi soldiers. They brought us back to the plaza, where we were allowed to use the restrooms located in houses that had outdoor toilets facing the plaza. I entered one of these, but could not find a place to hide. So, I went to another, and realized this one had a gap between the ceiling and the roof. I crawled into this space, and fell asleep until the next morning. When I woke up and looked through the window, I no longer saw soldiers patrolling the plaza, but I saw many corpses.

During the night, my father, my brothers Shimshon and Rachmiel, and my aunt Elke had disappeared without a trace. I escaped to the forest and hid there for



Salomon Fachler with his wife Angela Steinberg.

about four to six weeks, surviving on berries. When I understood that my feet had become swollen because of the lack of food, I returned to Ostrowiec. There, I saw some Nazi soldiers directing a group of Jews to one of the town's most important metal foundries, a shop known for its production of metal-cast train rails. Among them I spotted my brother Szulim, who was 11 years older than I was. I followed the group to the foundry and asked a Polish policeman to get my brother Szulim. As soon as my brother arrived, he bribed the guard with his watch to protect us. Szulim told me that the Nazis had constructed a ghetto next to the cemetery and that my two oldest brothers, Shmuel and Yankel, were there.

I went looking for them, and found them sharing a second-floor apartment with other people. It struck me that they were constantly talking about fleeing and joining the resistance. A few days later, Shmuel and Yankel told me that they were leaving and that they would come back to visit me. But they never returned, and I never saw them again.

Two days later, Szulim told me he was leaving, and he would come back to get me. Szulim did come back shortly thereafter. Escaping together was risky, but there seemed to be an opportunity: we had to go quietly to a wall behind a hilly part of the cemetery. At dawn we went to that wall, and my brother helped me jump off first before he hurdled over it. A resistance fighter carrying a revolver awaited us on the other side. The three of us set out for the forest, walking several hours. Once there, my brother told me he was going to take me to a family that supported the

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resistance.

Szulim had established contact with a Catholic couple that collaborated with the resistance. Joseph Kotwyzas and his wife Maria had no children and had agreed to adopt me under the guise of being Maria's nephew. Joseph was of Polish origins, but he had previously lived in Germany and was a German resident. Szulim brought me to a house where the Kotwyzas lived. Their home was set on a large piece of land, close to the forest, on the edge of Ostrowiec. From then on, I became Stefan Tadeus Kotwyzas. I helped Maria plant

decided to make me an altar boy to help hide my Jewish identity. Maria also wanted me to be baptized, but the priest told her he would only perform this rite if no one came to claim me after the war. I lived with Maria in Mintz for about three years until the war was over.

By the end of 1944, a great part of Poland had already been liberated by the Russian army. From then on, the resistance, as well as my brother, joined the Red army. During a military drill, Szulim was riding a motorcycle and had an accident. He fractured several ribs and

Mintz. I remember a big house filled with weapons, and a soldier keeping guard. Szulim was given a high-ranking position during the administration of Mintz.

My brother visited me at Maria's place several times within a period of about two months. One day, when Szulim felt that I had earned his trust, he told Maria that he wanted to take me on a vacation. But we never returned to Maria's house. Regina was able to sell some belongings she had saved during the war in exchange for about \$20 of gold. We travelled to Prague where we traded the gold for Zlotes.

After the war, the Hagana was searching for Jewish survivors to convince them to go to the British Mandate of Palestine. With help from the Hagana, we hoped to get to Italy because American and British forces occupied the area. We traveled from Mintz to Warsaw by train. From there we could not continue because the rails were damaged. The soldiers helped Szulim get rid of his military uniform. From then on, we took many paths, sometimes we traveled by truck, and other times we had to walk. We were always supervised and guided by the Hagana. We went through Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and finally reached Austria, where we stayed for about one week in a refugee camp. Then, we went to the mountains with a large group of Holocaust survivors.

We had to descend a mountain to reach Italy. We belonged to a group of about 100 refugees. For all of us to cross the border illegally, we needed to divide into small groups of 20 people. Szulim was sent with one group, and Regina and I went with another. On our way down my group was stopped by Russian soldiers. My brother noticed that something went wrong and came back for us. And for the second time, he had to bribe a Russian soldier with his wristwatch. At the bottom of the mountain, Hagana soldiers, belonging to the British army, were waiting with trucks to take us to refugee camps.

While we were in Italy, we met Samuel Lustig and his wife Sofia. Soon after, Regina suffered from appendicitis. Sofia looked after me while Szulim and Regina travelled to Modena's Military Academy for treatment. Afterwards, I was sent to a special camp in Cervino for children that had survived the Holocaust.

For me, Cervino was significant because I was able to return to a normal childhood.

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Fachler Family: Salomon (Shloime) is the baby.

potatoes, tomatoes and many vegetables. During my time with them, my brother Szulim was able to visit me a couple of times. He always arrived at night, along with his resistance companions.

After a year of living with the Kotwyzas, the Nazis discovered that Joseph was helping the resistance, and he was shot. From that moment on Maria felt our best option was to leave Ostrowiec. We travelled to a town near Mintz, because Maria had a close relationship with a cousin who lived there. Maria's cousin was married and lived in her own house; but she owned another house that was vacant and in good condition. This property was smaller than that of our previous home in Ostrowiec, but it was sufficient to cultivate some vegetables to survive on. However, I lost contact with Szulim.

One day, Maria decided to tell my story to the town priest. The following day, I went with Maria to meet the priest, who

was transferred to a hospital near Mintz Masowiecki.

After his release from the hospital, he was introduced to Regina Grunspan through a *shidduch*. She came from a wealthy family that owned several wheat mills. A Polish family had hidden Regina during the war. During this time Szulim began his search for me, and he returned to the town where he had originally left me with the Kotwyzas. When he inquired about Joseph and Maria, he was told that Maria had family in Grodzisk, a small town outside of Mintz. He thought it a strange coincidence that I was living near Mintz, so close to them.

It was easy for Szulim to find me, and my life changed completely. When my brother found the house, and opened the front gate, Maria and I recognized him immediately. I was extremely happy to see my brother. Maria and I hopped on his jeep to go meet Regina and see her house in

There, we were free, and we had everything — a swimming pool, a theater, and joyous activities such as singing, exercising, parading and running through obstacle courses. Because it was located at a high altitude, it was always cold in Cervino, and even during the summer the mountain tops were covered with snow.

Meanwhile, Szulim was trying to contact family members who had left for the Americas prior to WWII. In New York, there was my uncle Nathan and Regina's family. But he had no street addresses, and he searched for them through the U.S. consulate. Szulim did remember Uncle Moses' postal code. Uncle Moses had immigrated to Costa Rica, and Szulim sent a letter to San Jose P.O. Box 1203.

I had been in Cervino about two months when Szulim and Regina called me back to



Child survivors of Cervino.



Children singing in Cervino.

Modena's refugee camp. They had received a correspondence from Uncle Moses, who told them he was making arrangements for us to travel to Costa Rica.

Documents arrived that allowed us to transit through the United States. We boarded a ship in Taranto, south of Naples. This ship had been used to transport supplies and ammunition to U.S. soldiers during the war. The ship had about 20 passengers, many of them were Catholic priests travelling to New York. For some reason, at some point, the ship was redirected to Florida. About three weeks after our departure, we arrived in Pensacola. The captain of the ship asked Szulim how much

money he was carrying. Szulim replied he did not have much with him. Upon hearing this, the captain said that he would not allow us to disembark, and that we would be returning to Naples.

The next day, a well-dressed gentleman boarded our ship from a smaller one. The man asked for the Fachler family, and Regina recognized him as her uncle Monroe Macys because of his similar appearance to her own father. We were immediately allowed to go ashore.

We stayed at the most luxurious hotel in Pensacola. While getting dinner at the hotel we were recognized by some of the priests who had travelled with us. They

were happy to see we had finally gotten off the ship. From Pensacola we travelled to New York by train to meet my uncle Nathan. While in New York, we were welcomed by Monroe into his home in Long Island and by my uncle Nathan in Brooklyn. Eventually Szulim decided that we should go to Costa Rica to live with Uncle Moses and his sister Dvoire whom he knew from Poland.

I arrived in Costa Rica at the age of 11, and have lived in this peaceful country ever since. I became a medical doctor and participated in the first kidney transplant ever performed in Costa Rica. I married Angela Steinberg, and we have four children, eight grandchildren and two great grandchildren. ■

Note: After the war, Szulim discovered that our brothers Shmuel and Yankel were killed by pro-Nazi Partisans six months before the Germans surrendered.

Salomon Fachler (Shloime in Yiddish) lives in Costa Rica and is a member of our organization. During a recent Shabbos dinner, he showed his grandson, Daniel, the 2017 issue of The Hidden Child. Daniel was inspired to send us his translation of his grandfather's story of survival.

Under the organization "Embajada Mundial de Activistas por la Paz," Salomon Fachler has shared his story across his country, including to the Costa Rican Senate.

Salomon's story appears on YouTube under the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0tsK-pltdeY>