MEMORIES OF A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR

Chanoch Henoch Abramowitz z"l

By his grandchildren

Our Zaidy showed us firsthand how to overcome inhuman suffering and vast difficulties and live a full and meaningful life. Our Zaidy no longer has a voice, but we will not let the world forget what happened to him.

Our dear Zaidy, Chanoch Henoch Abramowitz, was born on Shabbos Rosh Chodesh Shvat into a world entirely different from the world we live in today. Zaidy was born in Poland in 1921, between the two world wars. Although this was a while before Hitler's rise to power, anti-Semitism was rampant.

Chanoch's father, Yaakov, was born in 1882 in the town of Rzasnia (pronounced Zhosnia), and his mother, Chaya Rochel, was born in 1883 in the town of Dzialoszyn (pronounced Jaloshin). Yaakov and Chaya, both G-d-fearing Jews, settled in the town of Rzasnia, 70 kilometers from Lodz. Chanoch was the seventh of nine children (four boys and five girls). Their first two sons died young. Chanoch's father, a Gerrer *chossid*, went to his Rebbe for advice. He was told to give each of his children two names. They then had Alta Necha (Nadja), Tzivia Perel (Chesha), Hersh Lipman, Faiga Yetta, Chanoch Henoch (Zaidy), Tunia, and Leah. (Presumably by the time they had five healthy children they no longer feared for their survival, so the youngest two were given only one name.)

When Chanoch was a young boy he attended public school for half the day, as per the law, and *cheder* in the afternoons. When he was 10 years old, his family moved to Lodz. They lived in the new part of town at 97 Vilchanske Street, and kept a grocery store in the front part of their house.

On September 1, 1939, war broke out in Poland. The next six years of Chanoch's life were full of tragedy and unbearable suffering, yet he miraculously survived time and again.

At the outbreak of the war, many young people decided to flee from the advancing German army. Almost half of those people were shot by German machine gunners from low-flying planes. Chanoch might have been among them but a few days before the war he cut his arm, which swelled significantly. He was in no condition to run, and



thus his life was spared from German machine guns.

In the fall of 1939, Chanoch's family returned to Rzasnia, hoping it would be safer than the big city. From there, Chanoch would smuggle chickens and other goods into Lodz. One evening he was intercepted by SS officers, who arrested him and took him to the station house. They proceeded to beat him for three hours straight. He was then placed in a holding cell where he was told that he would be shot in the morning. At eight o'clock the next morning, an officer entered his cell and snipped his hair, cutting into his scalp with every cut of the scissors. When he was done, a different SS officer sent him home. His release was inexplicable, and to the end of his life Chanoch believed the SS officer who sent him home was a *malach* sent from heaven.

The night of his release was in the dead of winter and a huge snowstorm had descended upon Lodz. His home was 40 kilometers, about 25 miles, away from the station house. As he was walking, a person passed him on a sleigh and drove him ten kilometers. He then continued walking in waist-deep snow. After walking another three or four kilometers, Chanoch could no longer carry on, and he fell to the ground almost lifeless. Another Pole passed and graciously took him all the way to Chanoch's own home. Finally, exhausted, frozen, battered and bleeding, he stumbled across the threshold of his house.

After spending a few months recuperating at home, Chanoch decided to flee Poland and escape to Russia, along with two of his friends. In Malkinia, a town near the border of then-Soviet Belarus, they were joined by tens of thousands of other Jews hoping to find a safe haven in the Soviet Union. Chanoch and his friends somehow got across the border into Bialystok, only to be met with rampant illness and starvation. The city was teeming with refugees who were sleeping everywhere—in the streets, the train stations, the shuls. After eight days in Bialystok, Chanoch's companion insisted that they return to Poland where they at least had food. And so, Chanoch returned to Rzasnia.

Conditions for the Jews worsened. Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star, and it was dangerous to be identified as a Jew. Jews were ridiculed in public and beaten, sometimes to death, and men were hauled off to camps, never to be seen again. Under these conditions, Chanoch stayed with his family in Rzasnia for nearly two years.

IN THE CAMPS

In June 1941, Chanoch was rounded up and transported by cattle car to Leszno (Lissa) labor camp, a sub-camp of Poznan (Posen). (His brother Hirsh Lipman was sent there a few weeks earlier. Hirsh Lipman managed to escape and went into hiding, but he was ultimately captured and killed. *Hashem yikom damo.)*

In the summer of 1942 the Nazis gathered all the Jews of Rzasnia to the town church and transported them to Treblinka, where most perished, including two of Chanoch's sisters and both his parents. *Hashem yikom damam.*

In Posen, the inmates worked very hard building railroad tracks. Life was difficult, and many people died of hunger and typhus. People were hanged daily for committing "crimes" such as stealing potatoes for sustenance. The head of the camp, Commander Wolkowitch, was very cruel and instilled terror into the hearts of the prisoners. Nevertheless, Chanoch had the courage and fortitude to bribe him with three pairs of socks that his mother had given him; thus he managed to remain on Wolkowitch's "good side" for the rest of his internment there.

One day while at work at the train station, the inmates observed a transport of potatoes being delivered. Some of them returned later that night, Chanoch amongst them, to try to steal some. He took along a work sack that had his name written on it and filled it with potatoes. Noticing a police officer, he dropped the sack and hid. Another prisoner picked up his sack and managed to evade capture. Four others were not as fortunate, and were hanged for their "crimes." Had he or his sack been found on the scene, he certainly would have been killed as well.

In June of 1943, the Nazis shut down the camp, and Chanoch was transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau (Auschwitz was an extermination camp and the neighboring Birkenau was a labor camp from where prisoners were sent on various work assignments). There he was tattooed with the number 142587 [see photos].

Chanoch arrived at Birkenau in a transport of 3,000 people. At roll call, the Nazis always required that the prisoners form rows of five. Then they randomly sent two rows of each to the left (the ovens), and one row of five to the right (labor). Thus, of the 3,000 people in the transport, only 1,000 were selected to live. Chanoch was fortunate enough to be in the row selected to live.

Having survived the notorious "selektzia," Chanoch was immediately put to work transporting rocks from one place to another. After four weeks or so, he heard that the Nazis needed 50 men to transport potatoes,

so he volunteered for the job, hoping it would be an improvement. After he signed up, he learned that nobody survived more than two days on the job. They were made to carry huge cartons of potatoes, two people per carton, all the time being beaten over the head with clubs by the guards. Chanoch quickly realized he had to get out of this assignment at all costs. Thinking quickly, he cut into his calf with a piece of tin and told his commander that he had stepped on a piece of glass. Unable to walk, he was returned to the barrack until his foot healed, a miracle in itself, first that he was not shot on the spot for being unable to work and second that he survived without any medical care or even soap and water.

Chanoch spent six months at Birkenau, where he was housed in barracks with 600 fellow inmates. Their beds consisted of three tiers of unfinished wood, and their blankets were thin and worn. The barracks were so crowded that in order to turn over in one's sleep, all the inmates on the same tier needed to do so in unison. They slept like this for five to six hours per night.

They were subjected to selektzias and roll calls daily in Birkenau, but there, unlike in Posen, their labor was without purpose. They were forced to lug 200-pound rocks a few hundred meters, and then a second group of inmates would drag them right back. This was part of the diabolical Nazi plan to completely demoralize the Jews, to cause them to lose all human feeling and eventually hope to die.

Zaidy's arm with the number he was given in Auschwitz.



The Nazis were especially notorious for committing atrocities on Jewish holidays. On Erev Rosh Hashanah, 1943, all the men were ordered to stand outside and undress in the pouring rain. Their clothing was thrown into huge vats filled with disinfecting chemicals. A while later the clothing was randomly redistributed and they were told to dress, with the burning chemicals still on. Their skin on fire, they were then marched in the rain four kilometers to Auschwitz, where they were sent straight to the showers. They were meant to be gassed that night.

Instead, to their surprise and relief, water poured out of the shower heads. They found out later that they were saved because the gas chambers had malfunctioned. The water alternated between boiling hot and freezing cold, and a guard with a dog stood watch to ensure that nobody moved from under the spray.

The prisoners were then marched back to Birkenau in knee-deep mud and pouring rain. The commander was so upset that they returned alive that he made them crouch with their hands over their heads for the entire night. The next morning (Rosh Hashanah) was work as usual.

SAVED FROM THE SANATORIUM

After several months in Birkenau, in December 1943, Chanoch was selected to join a crew that was sent to clean up the Warsaw ghetto, in the aftermath of the famous uprising. At first the Nazis did not select any Poles for the job, fearing that they knew the area too well and would attempt to flee. The Nazis had 930 foreign nationals but needed 1,000 men, so they reluctantly sent 70 Poles, Chanoch among them.

In Warsaw, Chanoch was given the number 9383 and assigned to a cleaning crew. Soon he contracted typhus and became very ill. As a result, he was selected to join a group being sent to a nearby "sanatorium." By this time, it was understood that "sanatorium" was Nazi-speak for "crematorium," yet Chanoch was powerless to refuse. While waiting in line to enter, the Nazis took a roll call and discovered that there were three people too many. The commander selected two people, and then he asked Chanoch how old he was. Chanoch was then 22, but he lied and said he was 18.

"This dog should remain alive," said the guard, and Chanoch's life was once again spared.

Back at the work camp in Warsaw, a guard who knew he had been sent to the "sanatorium" was shocked to see Chanoch alive. When Chanoch told him what had transpired, the guard was amazed by his miraculous





Above: Chanoch and Fraida Abramowitz
Center: Chanoch Henoch Abramowitz receiving a dollar from the Rebbe. Photo courtesy of Jem. JEM PHOTO #64951
Far right: Zaidy wrapped in *tefillin*, the tattoo made by the Nazis visible on his arm.

survival and declared, "If you survived until now, I will make sure you survive." From that point onward, the guard looked out for Chanoch and made sure he had enough to eat. He also managed to secure an easy job for him—as personal cook to one of the commanding officers, Captain Hannes, as well as official interpreter. These relatively favorable conditions lasted until Chanoch left Warsaw.

On July 29, 1944, the entire population of the Warsaw labor camp, numbering about 3,500 Jews and tens of German kapos, assembled for roll call. The camp commander, Lagerfuhrer Tempel, attended the roll call and announced that the camp would be evacuated. He announced further that all inmates were to march on foot to Kutno, about 130 kilometers away, and that whoever lacked the strength to march would be bussed there. The Polish Jews knew the Nazi mind too well by then to fall for such a cruel trick. About 260 people, nearly all of them Hungarian Jews (who were new to the Nazi regime), declared themselves incapable of marching, naively expecting to be given a seat on a bus. Those people were led to the police station house, where they were shot by Tempel and several SS officers.

THE DEATH MARCH

At 9:00 in the morning, each of the remaining prisoners received half a loaf of bread and were marched out of camp. They continued marching in oppressive heat, without water, until 6:00 in the evening. When they passed water, some of the prisoners knelt down to drink and were immediately shot by the SS officers. The group spent the night in an open field under the sky, parched with thirst. They were forced to lie down all night with their faces to the ground, and they were warned that anybody who lifted his head would be shot. On the first day of the march, about 40 people lost their lives.

The next morning bread was rationed, one loaf per eight people. The bread supply ran out after the first 1,500 people received their rations. Painfully thirsty, Chanoch and the inmates marched on. Many people collapsed along the way and were shot. They marched again until 6:00 in the evening of the second day. Lagerfuhrer Tempel





promised that they would receive water the next day, once they arrived at Lowicz. They continued marching the next morning and arrived in Lowicz around 11 a.m. Once there, they were led to the Bzura River that flowed through the town. When the first hundred people reached the water, the SS officers began firing at them, killing 20. Needless to say, no one else dared bend down to drink, and they continued to march in the deadly heat.

At 4:00 in the afternoon, they stopped for the night in a field near Torfowisko. One person somehow knew that there must be water in the vicinity and started digging in the ground with a spoon. He met with success at about two feet down, and everyone followed his lead. For the first time since the march began, Chanoch and his inmates finally quenched their thirst. Chanoch overheard the German guards talking amongst themselves: "The Jews really are a nation that cannot be consumed by fire!" Exhausted and now painfully hungry, everyone fell asleep.

The next morning the march continued. About noon it began to rain, and the march continued through a torrential downpour. They arrived at Zychlin at 5 in the afternoon and were led to a forest, where they spent the night in the downpour. Many people died that night, bringing the number of fatalities since the beginning of the march to about 500. *Hashem yikom damam!*

At 8:00 the next morning they lined up in rows at the train station, awaiting the next train. The train arrived at noon and they were loaded into cattle cars, 90 people per car. Inside the car they were divided into two sides, 45 per side, with German kapos standing in the center. Rations were handed out, and everybody received a loaf

of bread and a piece of margarine. It was unbearably hot inside the cattle cars, a condition exacerbated by the rain-soaked clothing, which increased the humidity.

During the night, some Greek Jews cut out a floorboard from the car and escaped; their fate is unknown. In retribution, the Nazis barred the door of the cattle car and sealed the remaining 83 occupants in it. Chanoch along with the others in his car did not see sunlight or eat or drink for the remainder of the trip. At least 40 people died in that car.

At 6:00 the next morning, on August 4, 1944, the train departed Zychlin. The kapos secured themselves several pails of water in the car. For everyone else, the thirst was so great that people drank their own urine. Others who had gold teeth had them extracted and then offered them to the kapos in exchange for a few swallows of water. They traveled for four days and nights, and arrived in Dachau, Germany, on August 9. Of the 3,500 people who marched out of Warsaw, only 2,000 reached Dachau alive, everyone broken and ill, living corpses.

Two weeks after his arrival in Dachau, Chanoch was transferred again to a sub-camp in Landsberg-am-Lech, where he was assigned the number 87231. There he felt lucky to get a relatively easy job repairing roofs of the officers' family residences at the camp.

In early 1945, the Americans were already liberating the concentration camps that were on Germany's front lines, but the troops had not yet reached camps like Landsberg that were located far from the front lines. The Nazis' atrocities only intensified during the death throes of their regime. On April 24, 1945, the entire surviving population of Landsberg camp, along with survivors of its sister camps in the Dachau region, were ordered on a death march.

The prisoners were assembled in Dachau, from where they marched for days through fields and forests without any food or water. In order to survive, the prisoners ate grass. Some in desperation even ate their own clothes. People died by the hundreds. Of the marchers who numbered 7,000 at the outset of the march, less than half survived. On the eve of April 30, they came upon horse carcasses in the forest and were given permission to eat them. Fires were lit, but most could not wait and ate the flesh raw. (Chanoch chose not to partake of the horse meat, although he was starving.) Afterwards the prisoners were ordered to lie face down on the ground. They could hear shouts and gunfire around them, but they did not dare lift their heads. They remained in that position until 2:00 in the morning, when a loudspeaker announced that they were now free.



Chanoch Henoch Abramowitz with his daughters, L to R: Tova Friedman, Goldie Lerman, and Rachel Bronchtain.

THE SURVIVORS

The newly released prisoners jubilantly ran to the nearest town, Wolfratshausen. Once there, Chanoch met Jewish American soldiers who asked him if he was *amcha* (Jewish). When he replied that he was, they took him to a motel where he was given a hot bath, food and a warm bed. By now Chanoch had witnessed too many of his liberated peers dying from eating too much too soon after years of starvation and malnutrition. He took care to eat slowly and in small quantities.

After his liberation, Chanoch traveled to Poland where he was reunited with two of his sisters, Tunia and Chesha. The three of them returned to Germany where they spent a year and a half in a displaced persons (DP) camp in Schwanndorf. (His third sister Nadja was in Russia at the time.) The rest of his family, parents, siblings, aunts,



uncles and cousins, all perished. *Hashem yikom damam.*

From the DP camp Chanoch emigrated to Israel via Holland. He arrived in Israel on Friday and the following Sunday was recruited to serve in the IDF, where he was on kitchen duty. He remained with the army until 1951, when he met his wife, Fraida, through mutual friends. They married and had three children, Tova Gittel (Friedman) and twins Chaya Rochel (Bronchtain) and Zahava Golda (Lerman). In 1958, Chanoch moved his family to the United States.

After he settled in the United States, Zaidy with three of his countrymen started a textile factory together called SPAR, which stood for the initials of their last names (Silota, Pulka, Abramowitz, and Reich). In 1967, Zaidy's partners insisted that they remain open on Shabbos. Zaidy refused and sold his share of the company, then worth $10,000, to the other three partners. The other three men went on to make millions, yet Zaidy never regretted what he did. It was this strength that helped Zaidy survive the war, and that very strength that continues to inspire us all.

Zaidy was the only one in his family who chose to remain *frum* after the war, together with Bahbi Fraida. They settled in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, together with many other survivors. At various points Zaidy and Bahbi sent their children to Bais Rivkah, and two of their children, Goldie Lerman and Rachel Bronchtain, went on to marry Lubavitchers. Zaidy was very respectful of the Rebbe, and he received dollars from the Rebbe on numerous occasions. Zaidy and Bahbi were familiar faces in Crown Heights where they spent a lot of time visiting their children as well as Fraida's twin sister, Bella Licht, who also lived in Crown Heights.

In Bensonhurst, Zaidy was very involved in the community shuls. Eventually many survivors passed on and the children all moved away. Zaidy felt a deep sense of obligation to continue living in the community where the few remaining shuls each literally had only 10 men left. Eventually Zaidy was forced to leave, too, because the shuls were no longer able to remain functional, and he and Bahbi moved to Flatbush, near their oldest daughter, Tova Friedman.

Our Zaidy, Chanoch Henoch ben Yaakov, passed away this year on Yud Gimmel Nissan, April 9, 2017, right before Pesach. Although short in stature, Zaidy was a giant of a man. He had every right to be depressed and broken after all that he had been through, but that was not the way he chose to live his life. He was upbeat and full of *chayus*, and his positive personality rubbed off on all those who had the privilege of knowing him. Zaidy always had a *dvar Torah* and a joke to share with those around him. He was a hard worker who valued *mentchlichkeit* above all. Zaidy showed us firsthand how to overcome inhuman suffering and vast difficulties and live a full and meaningful life. Our Zaidy no longer has a voice, but we will not let the world forget what happened to him.

This story is based on the many interviews Zaidy gave and the stories he shared with his grandchildren, as well as official first-hand accounts that Zaidy gave to the Historical Committee in Schwanndorf, on June 2, 1947. This article was compiled from material written by his grandchildren Harav Moshe Aron Friedman, Har Nof, Israel; Rabbi Tzvi Bronchtain, Las Vegas, NV; Chanie (Bronchtain) Rosenbluh; E. Rosenbluh; and Shoshi (Lerman) Eichler.