

A Holocaust Survival Story for April - by Ruth Chevion

There came a time in 1943, when my father and his brother needed to make a decision because their father was being evicted from his hiding place. Their father did not speak perfect Polish - his language was Yiddish. He did not have good false papers, and he could not pass for Polish. The ideal solution, the two brothers reasoned, would be to get their father out of Poland altogether, to Palestine if possible.

An undertaking of this dimension required discussion and planning. The first obstacle the brothers faced was how to get together to discuss it. A cardinal rule for Jews seeking not to be caught, was to avoid being seen with other Jews. It was said that one Jew alone could blend. Two Jews together looked like Jews. Above all, the rule was, never be seen with a member of your family.

How to discuss a plan without being seen together? There was no safe place indoors. Actually, each of the brothers, both my father and my uncle, maintained three different living places at the same time. This was in order to avoid becoming friends with anybody who might ask personal questions. They could always say they were just stopping by for a short stay on the way to somewhere else. The idea was to avoid making friends. My uncle's words: "People will ask the most personal questions when they think they know you."

Thus, while they had six "homes" between them, in none of these six places could they safely meet. And certainly, in no public place would they risk being seen together. But they had a solution . . .

The two brothers made their way, each independently, to a park in which there was a lake where you could rent kayaks at docks on opposite sides of the lake. Each one rented a kayak from a different dock and paddled in a leisurely fashion toward the middle of the lake. When they were in hearing distance of each other, they slowed down while continuing to paddle. There, in the middle of the lake, they talked and argued as their kayaks crossed each other.

The major decision they had to make was which of them, my uncle Alex, or my father, would be the one to accompany their father out of Poland. Clearly, he could not go alone. He was too old, and too Jewish looking. He needed cover. Meantime, neither brother was in a hurry to leave.

Both brothers were successfully hiding in plain view. My father had joined the Polish resistance, Armia Krajowa, where he was caught and beaten one time and left for dead just like his fellow fighters, but only for the crime of resisting the Nazis, not for being Jewish. He developed a brusque personality that discouraged friendship.

Alex meantime, was running black market gasoline from Russia to Poland, actually making money if you can believe it. Alex had a wonderful Polish appearance. Even into old age he could have passed for a Polish farmer with those hooded steely blue eyes, high cheekbones, and thick eyebrows.

Both Alex and my father spoke perfect Polish and either one could hold his own drinking shots of vodka when in company.

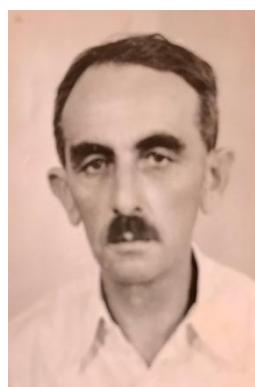
In end, it was decided that my father would stay, and Alex would go with their father. The decisive reason was that the two women in the family - mother and sister - could not manage on their own. They were in hiding in an apartment in Krakow, and it had been my father all along who was their emergency contact. He had been to their place and had been seen on the stairs and in the hallway. It was impossible now, for a different man to be seen going in there, especially a man who looked somewhat similar to the previous man.

And so it was, that Alex successfully got their father out of Poland, first by train to Czechoslovakia, the older man posing as a drunken peasant, while Alex kept watch from a distance. Once in Czechoslovakia, they met a guide who took them over the mountains, where unfortunately grandfather had a heart attack on the way and had to be carried. Local non-Jewish Czechs had set up a series of way stations that escorted them to Hungary. In Hungary they went to jail for three weeks for entering the country illegally but escaped and with help from the Jewish community made it to Romania, and from there to Turkey on the steamship "Bulbul."

The steamships Bulbul and Mefkure were last two ships to carry refugees from Turkey to Israel in WWII. My uncle and grandfather were aboard the Bulbul when she sailed on August 5, 1944. But her twin ship, the Mefkure, was bombed by the Germans and sunk in sight of the passengers on the Bulbul. Only the few who were able to swim to the Bulbul survived. My uncle shared with me his sad feelings of seeing people from the Mefkure desperately trying to swim to the Bulbul, and how one pregnant woman made it, along with just a few others, while hundreds drowned, both passengers and crew.

The whole story was reported the next day in the New York Times on page 5.

No wonder my parents always maintained that survival had nothing to do with cleverness. It was all about luck they always said. But Alex and my grandfather did make it to Israel before the end of the war, and my father survived also, and so did my grandmother Miriam and my aunt Chava.



My father, Paul Fessel.



My uncle, Alex Chevion

Never forget . . .