My Silent Pledge:
A Journey of Struggle, Survival and Remembrance
I am myself a child who survived the Holocaust in hiding with kindly Christians in The Hague, Holland. My nearly three years with them was comparatively uneventful, without apparent danger, and filled with my hiders’ love and attention. Then why do I tremble to this day with the reverberations of what had happened to me between the ages of two to five? For as much as I have tried to “normalize” my existence in hiding, it was off the scale of normality and left wounds and scars. Every Jewish child within the grasp of Nazi Germany was a hunted child and, when caught, murdered. One’s mind cannot normalize such a situation.

Hence, when I face the memoir of a fellow child survivor, I read with trepidation, not only in fear of the memories that will inevitably surface, but with the foreknowledge that I will likely encounter an experience far less fortunate than mine. After all, if my experience was “off the scale,” how much more so was that of children in even greater danger and in more strenuous circumstances?

But then again, if Sidney Zoltak is brave enough to write, I shall be brave enough to read—and shed some tears, inevitable tears. For that I am prepared.

A Shoah memoir is a precious document, not only for family but for all of us, our children and grandchildren. Sidney has provided a legacy that not only informs us but may protect us. For in recounting his life he enlightens us about good and evil, kindness
and indifference, compassion and hatred. Evidence for all is found throughout this at times terrifying, and often, inspiring account.

Remember that, of all Jewish children under German occupation, 93% were murdered. Counting the few that were rescued before the onset of the slaughter, fewer than one in ten were able to survive. In total, one and one-half million Jewish children and adolescents perished. If that alone is beyond imagining, then let us not describe how they were killed. The killers’ imagination had no bounds where murder was concerned.

Sidney was a child of eight when war broke out. He grew up quickly becoming “an adult in a child’s body.” And that body was malnourished and weakly. The Zoltaks hid in forests, barns, and dug bunkers into the ground, sometimes sharing space with a dozen people where there was no space. I know that my grandparents and their thirteen-year-old daughter (my aunt), were hiding in such a hole dug into frozen ground. They were found (betrayed?) and killed by local Poles, with axes. I shudder when I read of “bunkers.”

With the help of the “righteous” Krynskis, the Zoltak family survived. Sidney describes the consequences of survival in a thoughtful commentary on luck and guilt after liberation. And everywhere there are hints that children contributed to their luck through their silence and co-operation, their facility with languages, their suppression of grief and tears despite enormous losses. But, for most, that proved not enough.

For children of the Shoah, liberation was frequently marked less by the day the war ended than the day of arrival in the new country to begin life anew. And Sidney did that with a vengeance. He already spoke Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and Italian. French and English posed no particular problem. Sidney studied, worked, raised a family, became a stalwart leader in his community and devoted much energy to remembering the Shoah and to advocating for Holocaust Survivors, particularly those whose lives were compromised by their experiences and who have struggled throughout life.

I urge you to take this memorable journey with the author as he re-visits his childhood town and its environs, and brings to life its tragic past, his family’s sojourn in Italy and his triumphant accomplishments in his home of sixty-five years, Canada.

I also urge the reader to note his struggle with his faith and his G-D, especially when he and his dear wife Ann, also a child survivor, faced a tragedy that no parents should have to face, the loss of a son.

Ultimately, their courage, past and present, reveals them to have remained devoted to family, friends and community within their Jewish traditions. Nor did the author forget the people who shone a light in the darkness of the Shoah, a light sufficient for Sidney to have survived, when for most Jews, there was only darkness.

Read and learn. Learn that, even after survival, children were not necessarily welcomed in their new surroundings, nor were they encouraged to relate their stories. Theirs were not considered important enough. After all “they were too young to have suffered or to have memories.” In many ways, they were silenced, ignored, and sometimes humiliated. I remember it well. The Holocaust did not end for us children. The Zoltak memoir reflects the postwar struggle, its good moments as well as its difficulties. But the author’s achievements are noteworthy and inspiring, an admirable journey. I am so proud to know him and so grateful for his wisdom.

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In September of 1997, I find myself on a journey I had vowed never to make. It begins with my wife, Ann, and me boarding a plane in Montreal for a flight to Warsaw, Poland. Our son, Larry, will leave later that evening on another airline and meet us at the airport in Warsaw.

The last time I was in Warsaw, I was eight years old. It was the summer of 1939.

We are joined by seven other members of my family at the hotel in Warsaw. Arriving from Israel are my cousin, Chana Broder, her husband, Tashie, their son, David, and cousin, Shosh Bentman, and her husband, Yigal. My stepbrother, Simon Braitman, and his wife, Josephine, are coming from Rochester, N.Y.

Together, our band of ten has planned a harrowing four-day journey into the past. It begins with a return to my hometown of Siemiatycze (Siemiatyck in Yiddish) and then, on to other sites in Poland, mostly concentration camps that were part of the Nazis’ murdering industry. These death factories were created and run by the German Third Reich with the enthusiastic and willing assistance of many people in Poland and neighbouring nations.

Before the war, the Jewish community of Siemiatycze had existed for 400 years. What I remember of my town is that, before September 1939, it was full of proud Jews who had created a vibrant and compassionate society of high ideals. In the summer of 1944, after liberation, when my family and I returned to our town, we were treated like strangers, like outsiders, by the Poles we encountered.
After the war, when someone recognized one of their former Jewish neighbours, they would ask: “You are still alive?” This question openly demonstrated that they did not want us coming back. Some went so far as to murder—without consequence—a few of the returning Jews. This scared the rest of us sufficiently and forced us to flee the only home we had ever known.

Some 52 years earlier, as my parents and I left Poland, I had vowed never to return to my birthplace. Yet, here I am.

What has led me to change my mind? Why have I returned to visit this place of hatred, death and destruction, this place I once called my town?
Chinie (Henia) Zoltak
Sidney's mother

Israel (Srule) Zoltak
Sidney's father

Grandmother Rivka Kejles

Yehoshua (Sidney) Zoltak
Age 14–15

The Kejles family posing outside its home in Grodzisk.
(From Left front: Mother's uncle Menashe Hirszfeld, Chayale Kejles, Grandmother Rivka Kejles, Sidney Zoltak, Grandfather Froyke Kejles, From left back: Ruchl Kejles, Ytke Kejles)

Ghitke Zoltak
Sidney's paternal grandmother

Grandmother Rivka Kejles and aunt Ytke Kejles
1938 Warsaw

Yehoshua (Sidney) Zoltak
Age 14–15
I WAS BORN IN JULY 1931 IN SIEMIATYCZE, WHICH LIES IN northeastern Poland, close to the border of modern day Belarus. Some of my earliest memories go back to when I was three or four years old. It was a time when I had everything to be thankful for. I was an only child surrounded by a loving family, a comfortable home, lots of friends and happy times. I was told many times over that a midwife delivered me in my parents’ home at Plac Pilsudskiego 8 and named Yehoshua—Shie—after my paternal grandfather who had died a few years before my birth. Everyone called me Shiele because my mother’s oldest brother also was called Shie.

My parents, Srule and Chinie, along with my paternal grandmother, Ghitke, and I lived in a two storey row house made of brick with metal grillwork balconies. For a short time, the household also included my father’s youngest brother, Yitzele. On the ground floor, several rooms were set aside for my parents’ clothing store of men’s and ladies’ ready-to-wear.

My father was a gentle-hearted man, one of few words. Fair-complexioned and slim, he wore glasses and, although he was not considered short (as most men in our town were shorter), he appeared to
be shorter than my mother, a beautiful, fair-skinned woman who walked with her back straight and her head held high. Ever popular, my mother had a bevy of friends and, in our small family, she was the spokesperson. The Zoltak family had been Siemiatyce natives for several generations. Many members of my father’s family lived in and around the town. Two of his brothers, Kalmen and Yitzele, resided on the same square where we lived and my father’s uncle, Yankel Zoltak, lived in a row house adjoining ours. Two of my father’s siblings had emigrated. His younger sister, Rashe, had settled in Eretz Yisrael (Palestine) in the late 1920s, married a native of Siemiatyce and had two children. My father’s younger brother, Meishke, had left for Argentina where he married a Jewish girl from Warsaw, and had a daughter.

Jewish life in Siemiatyce began in 1582. In 2004, Bozena Czerkas, a local schoolteacher, wrote about the vanished Jewish community of Siemiatyce in the periodical, *Siemiatycki Kurier Samorządowy*¹ (our translation) and described how, for almost 400 years, Jews outnumbered other inhabitants. The first Jews, coming from Lithuania, were welcomed by the town’s inhabitants and given permission to settle and conduct commerce.

In the year 1765, there were 1015 Jews... In 1897, there were 4,638 Jews out of 6000 residents (77%) and in 1921 there were 3,718 Jews representing 65% of the total population of Siemiatyce ... (but) the life of the Jews in Siemiatyce was never as rich and dynamic as in the years 1918-1939. In 1938, there were 4,303 Jews living in Siemiatyce, 52.9%, which means that every second inhabitant in town was Jewish. The present elderly inhabitants do not recall too many examples of animosity between the two communities. They rather remember many close ties and neighbourly cooperation.

From the day I was born until September 1939, my paternal grandmother, Ghitke, lived with us. A slight woman, she was kind, gentle, and mild-mannered. She had been brought to Siemiatyce to marry my grandfather, but most of her family remained in her hometown of Ciechanowiec, some 40 kilometres northeast. My grandmother, whom I affectionately addressed as *Bubeshie*², was widowed before I was born. During my early years, her room was on the same floor as mine. Some of my first memories, going back to when I was probably three, were of waking up in the middle of the night, crying and crawling into my grandmother’s bed for comfort. Whenever I was in trouble with my parents, I would run to her for protection and sympathy, which she gave freely and generously. After all, I was named after her late husband.

*Bubeshie* Ghitke kept a very low profile in our household. She would watch over me while my parents were out but, when she was unoccupied, she would sit in a corner of the house reading the “good book” for women, the *Tzene U’rena*. I don’t know how much education she had but I do know that she did not read novels or the works of famous secular writers. Sometimes she would travel to Ciechanowiec or to Bialystok to visit her family. I can’t say what kind of a relationship she had with my mother but I believe it was a cordial one, though not necessarily close. The only one of my grandmother’s relatives I can remember visiting us was her nephew. He used to come to Siemiatyce with members of his *Betar* Zionist youth movement group on the Jewish festival of *Lag Ba’Omer*,³ as was the custom at the time, to compete in sports events with other Jewish youth. I vividly remember his elegant *Betar* uniform with military trimmings and a military-style cap. When he walked with me, holding my hand, I experienced mixed feelings—importance, because I was holding the hand of a regally dressed grown-up but also embarrassment, because I was in close company of a bitter rival to my favourite Zionist youth movement, the *Hashomer Hatzair*.

Bozena Czerkas described the ideological wings of the Jewish community and their affiliated youth movements:

Between the two world wars, Jewish organizational life in Siemiatyce was very active and vibrant. The Zionist organizations were supportive of the establishment of a homeland in Eretz Yisrael. They directed the youth towards a Zionist ideology as well as encouraged their involvement in educational, cultural, athletic and political activities.
The most active secular Zionist organizations in Siemiatycze were: the Hashomer Hatzair, the Betar and Poalei Zion. Two other influential parties among the Jewish youth were the Polish Communist Party and the Bund Organization of Jewish Workers in Poland. The Bund believed in Poland as a homeland for Jews, wanted to remain living there while establishing cultural autonomy.

My father’s younger brother, Yitzele, belonged to Hashomer Hatzair, the elite youth movement of our town. The townspeople called him and his friends Zlota Mlodziesz, the golden youth. Between the ages of five and seven, I would do all kinds of chores for the group’s members if they promised to take me to their meeting locale, which was called the ken. Naturally, I was too young to join but I nevertheless kept on hoping.

Bubeshie Ghitke often took me to visit Uncle Kalmen, my father’s oldest brother who operated a watch repair shop. He lived on the other side of Plac Pilsudskiego, at the far end of the square, near the city’s administration offices, and not far from the New Synagogue. My mother seldom took me as she was busy in her role as the salesperson in our store. To get to Uncle Kalmen’s house, we had to go around the massive building complex called the Ratusz or the Broom (in Yiddish), an imposing old structure situated in the centre of town. Although the literal translation of “Ratusz” is town hall, I don’t remember it housing any government offices. On the ground floor, it mainly housed wholesale and retail stores that were mostly owned and operated by Jews. The upper floor was used for private residences.

A visit to my uncle was really a visit with my aunt and cousins, Malche and Elye. A watchmaker by trade, Uncle Kalmen would sit in a small, nearby room repairing watches with a loop on one eye and a small screwdriver in his hand. He was fair, of medium height and wore glasses. Sitting quietly opposite him on another bench was my Uncle Yitzele. Dark-complexioned and very slim, Yitzele had worked for a time with my father selling clothing but later learned to become a watchmaker. I remember visiting Uncle Kalmen’s family more often than they would visit us, possibly because of my mother’s work in the store. My aunt did not work although she was always doing something, either knitting or sewing. Our visits were never long. Bubeshie would sit and talk to my aunt while I played with my younger cousin, Elye. Being older, Malche seldom joined us.

I remember a story about a serious accident that had occurred in Uncle Kalmen’s household. One day, there had been a very heated argument between my aunt and Malche. In a fit of rage, my aunt threw a pair of scissors in the direction of her daughter but instead of hitting Malche, the sharp blade of the scissors hit Elye in the eye. The doctors replaced it with a glass one. That was a very tragic time in my uncle’s household. As the details of that accident were never really mentioned in front of me, I understood that this was not a subject for discussion.

Uncle Yitzele lived with us for awhile but, even after he left to live on his own, he would still come and take me out to the fair or the circus. He made me feel important and I loved him very much. He would parade me through the streets of Siemiatycze or sit me down on the front frame of his bicycle and take me for long rides. I wanted everybody, especially my friends at school, to see me. After all, he was a very active member of the Hashomer Hatzair.

My father’s uncle, Yankel Zoltak, owned and lived in the building attached to ours, along with his widowed daughter, Chaje-Perl Gvirtz, and her son, Riven, who was six years older than me. I don’t remember what kind of work Uncle Yankel or Chaje-Perl did but I do remember that she walked with a limp and had a very close relationship with my mother. Riven, also an only child, took on the role of my protector, and I looked up to him. As I came of age, we attended the same school, the Hebrew Tarbut (cultural). When older and bigger boys threatened me, I would tell them that they had better leave me alone or they would have to answer to my cousin, Riven Gewirc!

My mother was born Chinie Kejles in 1907 in the village of Grodzisk, about 20 kilometres from Siemiatycze. Until 1937, she had only had one relative in town: her eldest sibling, Shie, who was partly responsible for introducing my parents. Once married, she moved to my father’s town while her family stayed in Grodzisk where my grandparents had a general store for the local inhabitants. My mother had a twin sister, Chayke who, before I was born, had emigrated
to Canada where she married. My mother also had two older brothers, Hertzke and Shie. Hertzke also emigrated to Canada. He had married Tzirl, and they had a daughter, Eudice, three years younger than me and a son, Emmanuel, twelve years my junior.

My Uncle Shie was married to Chana and they had two daughters, Chayale and Yentale. A strong, well-built man, taller than average, Shie was a wheeler-dealer involved in a number of enterprises including a dairy in his home village of Grodzisk. He was a hard worker who travelled a lot, particularly in the countryside, but he was also very devoted to his parents and helped them whenever it was needed. He was always ready to lend a hand to his family and was considered the patriarch of the Kejles family. To me, he appeared very serious, a disciplinarian. When he spoke, you listened. When he asked you to do something, you did it, no questions asked. The other members of the family also followed this dictum.

I often visited Chayale and Yentale. As they lived on the same perimeter of our square, I had permission to go there on my own. Most of the time, I ended up playing with Yentale, one year younger than me. At times, Uncle Shie would also take me to visit my grandparents in Grodzisk. We would usually go by horse and buggy and, on occasion, to my great excitement, he would let me hold the reins. Those trips were wonderful and I remember feeling like a real grown-up.

My mother’s extended family also included many uncles, aunts and cousins. Her father came from a family of six children and her mother was one of seven. My maternal grandfather, Froyke Kejles, and his six siblings were born in a village called Krzemien, north of Siemiatycze. The eldest, Manus and Doba, lived in Warsaw with their families. Manya, Leah and Sam Kalles had emigrated to Canada. There, they produced families of three, four and six children respectively. My maternal grandmother, Rivka Levin, had four brothers: Manus, Harry, David and Sidney Levin(e) who had also emigrated to Canada while two other siblings, a sister and a brother, remained in Poland.

Wherever we turned, we were surrounded by family. In 1937, my mother’s younger sister, Ruchl, married Avraham Lisogurski, Uncle Yitzele’s friend, and fellow Shomrak⁵. Everyone called him Avrum. His nickname as a boy was Lalek⁶. They moved into a house a few doors away from us, on the same side of the street. Aunt Ruchl wanted to be like her mother and in many ways she was. She was dark and of medium build and, like her mother, well-read and interested in the issues of the world. She held definite opinions but often kept them to herself. Her husband was a quiet but fun loving man. He had a dark complexion and was very handsome. Uncle Avrum was an electrician and had a shop that fixed and sold all kinds of small electrical appliances, including radios. I liked to go there because there was always music playing on one of his radios; often the short wave was set to music being broadcast from some other country. Bulgaria seemed to be one of his favourites.

In October 1938, Aunt Ruchl gave birth to a girl. From the outset, everybody called my little cousin Chanale, a name we call her to this day. She resembled her father with a dark complexion and black eyes. From the day that she was born, I developed a special affection for Chanale. Since I was an only child, an exception among our town’s families, I began to look upon her as my little sister. I would check in on her all the time and anxiously looked forward to her growing up so that we could play games together. Once, when she was only a few months old, I remember meeting her father on the street and asked how Chanale was. He responded with a chuckle: “She is wonderful and is already running around the house.” When I heard the great news, I ran over to my uncle’s house only to find Chanale still crawling about on the floor. When I told my aunt what Uncle Avrum had said, she explained: “Chanale is not able to walk yet and certainly not run.” What a terrible disappointment. I left the house and went on waiting impatiently for Chanale to begin growing up.

My father was born in 1903 in Siemiatycze. When his father Shie died, my father assumed the responsibility for managing my grandfather’s tailor shop, which also provided a livelihood for his mother and Uncle Yitzele. After my parents married, they began to transform the shop into a store. Customers, mostly from the surrounding villages, would come to buy clothes. The store carried both men’s and ladies’ suits and coats, mostly produced by contractors and manufacturers. My mother slowly took over the job of selling in the
Eventually, a flat was found in Outremont, an upscale residential neighbourhood of Montreal that lies on the eastern slopes of Mount Royal. The flat into which we moved was in the poorer section of the district where ordinary working-class people lived. Nevertheless, I now lived in Outremont. Due to a shortage of postwar rental housing in Montreal, my mother and Mr. Braitman had to pay key money, close to $1,000. For that sum, they were granted a lease and a house full of old furniture that also included an out-of-tune piano. The flat had four bedrooms, a dining room and a living room with a fireplace. One of the bedrooms was rented to a friend of mine, Moishe (Murray) Lazar, from Selvino. During the five years we lived there, we never used the fireplace for anything other than decoration.

Living on Stuart Avenue was a vast improvement over our rented room and I was now able to invite friends home. The awkward, uneasy feeling I had after meeting Mr. Braitman slowly evaporated. Although our conversations were limited to daily routine, we were at least now able to look at each other when speaking. I also saw a major change in my mother’s disposition—she appeared happy.

When we moved into the flat, David and I became roommates. A few years my senior, David was very short and walked with a tilted gait. That tilted gait was the result of his incarceration in a concentration camp. The sole survivor of his immediate family, he was liberated in Auschwitz in January of 1945.

Mr. Braitman had also not been spared his share of suffering during the war.

Yehoshua Braitman, now known as Sam, was born in the town of Zwolin, Poland. When WW II broke out, he was living in Garbatka, approximately 60 kilometres from the city of Radom, where he had had a tailor shop for made-to-measure men’s clothing for the elite of the town and the region. He was an excellent craftsman and his customers came from far and wide. He had married Dora Flamemberg and had three children, Szymon (Simon), Cyla and Moniek. In July 1942, Sam was taken to Auschwitz, together with Polish educators, professionals and political prisoners, and put to work as a tailor, making clothes for the German administrators. Occasionally, he was rewarded with extra food rations for his good craftsmanship. He very often shared these with other inmates. In January 1945, he was taken to Ebensee, a sub-camp of Mauthausen and, in April 1945, just as the war was ending, he was liberated by the U.S. Army.

His oldest son Szymon was taken from Garbatka in 1942 to the slave labour camp in Pionki, Poland, and remained there until July 1944. He was then sent to Sosnowiec, a sub camp of Auschwitz. In January 1945, Szymon was taken on a 10-day death march which brought them to the Mauthausen Concentration Camp in Austria and, from there, sent to Gunskirchen. On May 4th, 1945, he was liberated by the 71st U.S. Army Infantry Division. By that time, Szymon was very sick, so two friends left him in a church in Lambach, Austria. When he regained consciousness, he was in a hospital. Three weeks later, he was taken to the Lambach DP Camp.

One evening a man approached the camp asking if he could stay overnight. Szymon recognized his father’s voice. The next morning, they left together for their hometown of Garbatka in hope of finding other family members. There they learned that, in the fall of 1942, Mr. Braitman’s wife, 10-year-old daughter, and his eight-year-old son had been murdered in Treblinka. They were also warned off by neighbours not to attempt to repossess their former house. Father and son left Poland and went to the Feldafing DP Camp in Germany. By then, Szymon was 15 and was accepted at an orphanage sponsored by the U.S. Government. Thus, in 1947, Szymon went as an orphan to the US but his father was denied entry and, instead, immigrated to Canada as a tailor in 1948.

Soon after moving to Stuart Avenue, my mother began to correspond with the Krynskis. She addressed the letters to “Family Krynski” but the responses she received were mostly from Stasza, and sometimes from Jozef. My mother started sending the Krynskis parcels, as there were no legal means by which she could send money directly. First, she sent pharmaceuticals, non-prescription drugs
Next to a photo of Irwin, wearing a Malcolm Campbell t-shirt is an excerpt of a poem written by one of his classmates:

*His friendly grin illuminated the halls
And those he knew liked him.*

*For he had so many friends
And he disliked no one.
What more could be said?*

— C. Chevalier

Months later, when we dedicated the monument on Irwin’s grave, we had that excerpt engraved on the footstone.

Endnotes

1. *Yid.* meaning black-eyed charmer
2. *Yid.* Mother tongue

IRWIN’S DEATH WAS A PAINFUL WOUND THAT REMAINED wide open. Although we remembered the numerous pleasures, the pride and the joys we had experienced, the pain persisted. It is often said that time is a great healer. I think that time helps but does not heal; it merely teaches you how to best handle the pain. But the pain remains.

After the seven days of mourning, Larry went back to school and I resumed some activities in my office, bringing Ann with me to work. Together, we tried to keep busy during the day. The evenings and the nights at home, however, were the most difficult. Although
blessed with the support and compassion of our family and many friends, there were a few who stayed away. Some people later told me that it was too difficult for them to see our sorrow. They were “uncomfortable” seeing us so sad. In time, Ann and I learned to accept this peculiar behaviour.

After the first thirty days of mourning (shloyshim), we felt totally uprooted. Ann and I were now constantly together, but instead of helping one another to deal with our grief, the opposite was occurring. We were taking turns dragging each other further down, always sad, often angry.

Months before Irwin’s death, Ann and I had considered moving into town. We had put our duplex on Joseph Casavant up for sale, but we hadn’t found anything suitable to buy. Ann and I were undecided about where we wanted to live but we both agreed that we had to move. It was unbearable to remain where we were. In May, we sold our house. First, we stayed with my mother and stepfather for a while and later rented a very small furnished apartment on Décarie Boulevard. But for Larry’s sake, we could not remain living in a stifling apartment for long. In the fall of 1973, we moved into our new home, a semi-detached split level in Côte St. Luc, a suburb where the majority of residents were Jewish. On the same street, a few houses down, was a very prominent synagogue, the Congregation Tifereth Beth David Jerusalem, the “Baily Shul.” Also within walking distance was Bialik High, the school Larry attended.

Our relationship with Larry was greatly affected after Irwin was gone. Our love and affection towards him were marred by sadness and conversely, joy was gone from his teen personality. Larry was now sad and angry, too. His most pronounced resentment was directed towards the synagogue, our house of worship. Before his brother died, Larry had been diligent at preparing for his own bar mitzvah and used to go to the synagogue almost every Saturday. After Irwin’s death, he didn’t want to go at all. Although we didn’t talk about it, he too must have felt, as Ann and I did, betrayed by the Almighty.

Larry and I made very few contributions to the interior of our new home, confined to choosing a proper sound system and television set for our den, and putting up a ping-pong table in the basement. That ping-pong table was a wonderful addition because it not only allowed Larry and me to get a bit of exercise but, more importantly, it was an outlet for our tensions and a release for our troubled feelings. We would play at the end of the day, before or after dinner. Larry would also invite friends over to play and our new home began to take on life. The traffic of young people through our house had a very positive effect on Ann and me. We encouraged our son to bring his friends home for whatever they wanted to. In the meantime, I returned to playing tennis, the sport that I had taken up with enthusiasm while living in New Bordeaux.

Ann and I continued to work together in the office, a ten minute car ride from our new home. During the day, we kept busy. In addition to working with me in the office, Ann began to organize our living quarters but her heart was not into decorating. For a long while, we both went to bed early and, in spite of tranquillizers and sleeping pills, took turns lying awake. Living on Baily Road brought us nearer to the organized Jewish community but celebrating Jewish holidays had become difficult. For a few years, Ann and I could not participate. Still hurting and unhappy, we remained onlookers.

For the Jewish High Holidays in 1975, we decided to take a trip to Italy. It was Ann and Larry’s first trip ever to Italy and, for me, the first time back after 27 years. The reason we chose Italy and not Israel, where we had many relatives and friends, was that we wanted to be someplace where we would be alone. The three of us wanted to be together, by ourselves, during the holidays. In Italy, we would be visiting places, not people.

We landed in Milan a few days before Rosh Hashanah and the first place we visited was the cemetery where my father was buried. We went to the Jewish community office to find the exact location as Milan has a few Jewish cemeteries. At the office, they told us that the burial records were in the city archives. After walking around to the point of exhaustion, we received directions from a local, a complete stranger who literally led us to the right office. At the archives, we found the record of my father’s death on December 3rd, 1945 and his burial in the Jewish section of Cimitero Maggiore. The next day we found his grave. The tombstone that my mother had erected had
on by people because I had a soft side and always wore my heart on my sleeve. I have so much respect for my mom. She was street smart. She always knew the right way to do things, how to take the straight road.

The day of the funeral is a blank. All I remember is that, as we were about to leave the family room, I asked if I could stay behind. I leaned over my mom’s coffin and froze. I did not want to move or leave. The situation was so surreal. I did not want to walk out of that room. I could not handle the closure, the reality. It was eerily quiet but, after several minutes, I had to leave. When I walked out into the chapel, I was aghast at what I saw. The place was packed beyond the doors and the halls and out into the street. The large crowd of people was a testament to my mother.

One never gets a chance to change history, only the chance to make history.

APPENDIX 4

Transmitting the Legacy

Commemoration and Education

I stand here a mourner among many mourners
Who for so many years have gathered this way
That ancient Kaddish prayer together to say
For the Jewish world that was and is deadly silent today.†
—S.J. Zoltak

THE VERY FEW CHILDREN WHO SURVIVED WERE TAUGHT that speaking out about our experience was dangerous. Silence was safer. We learned the lesson well; we learned to hide the ravages of our early life from others. We even hid our feelings from adult survivors in our own families.

We were often told, primarily by those who survived the concentration camps, that: “You were lucky to have been in hiding. You were lucky to have been too young to remember and too young to have suffered.”

As a result, most of us classified as Child Survivors of the Holocaust kept silent for a long time. Yet, in spite of our silence, we retained our vivid, horrifying memories tucked deep inside our hearts. It is also generally known that even the adult survivors, after arriving in their adopted countries, recounted the story of their survival only to their fellow survivors. Members of local Jewish communities did not particularly want to hear or even believe the horrifying accounts told by the witnesses to the largest tragedy of the Jewish people.
The former Selvino children developed their own means by which to remember and endure. By 1983, the group in Israel had formed an association that went on to raise funds for a documentary film that featured the stories of former Selvino graduates who had made aliyah. That association was also instrumental in promoting photo exhibits of “The House” at various Israel institutions, including Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority in Israel. As orphans, when they were brought to the house on the mountain, they immediately acquired siblings. In Israel today, they consider themselves to be family. Up until the past few years, every time I travelled to Israel, the group managed to arrange a get-together with old friends. In North America, those few Selvino alumni here are spread out over the continent but try to keep in touch. When we see each other, we all feel a kind of kinship that is difficult to describe. A few of our spouses would remark that, when we’re together, we behave like children. But then, we were children with lost childhoods when we first met.

In the spring of 1993, I was asked to take over the chairmanship of the Remembrance Committee and the Yom HaShoah Commemoration subcommittee. I accepted on condition I would share the responsibility of the annual commemoration with Sara Weinberg, a daughter of survivors who was also a member of the Remembrance Committee. By the time we assumed our positions, the Remembrance Committee had been moved to the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre (MHMC) where we became a new standing committee of the MHMC. We continued this partnership for 14 years providing the community not only with annual Yom HaShoah commemorations but also other Holocaust related programs.

Prior to mounting the 1999 Yom HaShoah program, I was looking at Yiddish poetry for an appropriate poem to use in my opening remarks. Not finding what I wanted, I decided to write my own poem to express the mood and the reason for commemorating. The following poem in Yiddish is translated here:

_Soon I’ll recite the lament for our kin_  
_Here we’ll honour the deaths of the slain._

_I stand here an orphan among many orphans_  
_My words are low whimpers, pleas, entreaties_  
_Forever to remember, never to forget_  
_You, the destroyed Jewish towns and cities._

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In 1996, my wife Ann and I became involved with Steven Spielberg’s Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, an elaborate undertaking to record the testimonies of survivors. We completed an intensive course and became accredited as interviewers for the Foundation. We were given pre-interview forms and were assigned to meet individual survivors and arrange for a videotaping of their history. I don’t remember how many survivors I interviewed but I recall that I did the interviews in the language that the survivor preferred: some interviews were in English, some in Yiddish, and one in Italian.

Around that time, I also became an active member of the Speakers Committee and took on assignments to speak to adult groups and schools about the Shoah. As difficult as these testimonies are to do, they are still a most rewarding experience. Every time I speak to a class of school children, I vividly remember my meeting with my friends in the Ghetto on the eve before my escape. I tell the students the story of my friends’ final days and the story of my own survival.

In 2002, when the old Holocaust Centre and Museum closed and a new president—a fundraiser—was parachuted in to lead the troops to raise funds for a new Holocaust Centre and Museum, a serious clash between the community leadership and the survivor activists arose. Since its inception, the first Holocaust Museum had been housed in the basement of the Federation CJA building known
with suicides or attempted suicides? She went on to tell me that the Rwandan community was dealing with this very serious issue among the survivors of the Rwandan genocide. I immediately agreed to address that community and to tell them about my Uncle Shie, whose wife and two daughters were murdered in Treblinka. I told the gathering how, after liberation, his two sisters were carefully watching over their brother who had become reckless and belligerent. I concluded that my uncle did not commit suicide. Instead, he met a lady, got married, had a son and built a new family. I told the group that it takes hard work and courage, but there is hope when one doesn’t give up.

I am now also active on a national level and involved in the leadership of the survivor community of Canada. In 2007, I was appointed as co-president, with Nate Leipcyger of Toronto, of the Canadian Jewish Holocaust Survivors organization. At the same time, I was also named to the board of directors of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc., usually called the Claims Conference, representing the Jewish and survivor community of Canada. As my parents’ generation has passed on, we, their children, have come up to the front lines. I only hope that our children and grandchildren, the third generation, will be able to continue the legacy.

Endnotes

1. Translated from the Yiddish by Edit Kuper
2. Translated from the Yiddish by Edit Kuper

Acknowledgements

Most of the narrative written in this memoir, the story of my life, can be attributed to my clear and vivid memory of the past. I am, however, grateful to my aunt, Rachel Lisogurski (née Kejles) who wrote her story, the story of our survival many years ago. It was self-published in 1987 by her daughter, Chana, and son-in-law, Menashe Broder, under the title Out of the Depths. In it, she described in detail our escape from the ghetto and the frightening trek in the dark through fields and forests. At a time when it was still fresh in her mind, she also documented some of our struggle to survive while in hiding.

I have also used the information published in The Community of Semiatych, the Yizkor book of the Community of Siemiatycze, which recorded the numerous vicious incidents and acts of cruelty perpetrated by the German authorities and their local assistants against the Jews of that town.

I particularly wish to thank Sara Weinberg, who co-chaired the Remembrance Committee with me for 14 years, and who not only helped me with some initial editing but also encouraged me to continue to write beyond my original plan. There were many others who have read bits and pieces of the various manuscripts and made numerous and encouraging comments. During the whole process, I have also received constructive criticism that helped me to try harder to make it better. I thank all who participated.

Thanks also to my content editor, Edit Kuper, who guided me throughout to produce a readable manuscript, and a special thank
you to my final editor, Gina Roitman, who worked to marshal the most important narratives of my writing to produce this cohesive and comprehensive story of my life.

My sincere thanks to my son, Larry, his wife Janet, and my three wonderful grandchildren, Jason, Melissa and Matthew, who helped me to keep going in the last few difficult years. And lastly, to my late wife, Ann, who read the beginning of my writings that I called ‘My Journal,’ and encouraged me to continue. It is painful to acknowledge that she did not live long enough to read the end.