

**Copyrighted Material**

# Contents

Foreword by Rabbi Naftali Schiff with Jonathan Kalmus	ix
Prologue: Ghosts	1
1 Family	9
2 End of Innocence	23
3 The Last Goodbye	39
4 Desecration of the Dead	55
5 Prisoners of Fate	71
6 The Light of Life	85
7 From Slave to Pilgrim	99
8 The Stairway of Death	113
9 The Limits of Kindness	127
10 Freedom	143
11 Betrayal	157
12 Beginning of the End	171
13 Crime and Punishment	189
14 Save the Children	205

## CONTENTS

15	New Horizons	221
16	Love Story	239
17	Choose Life	259
18	Survivor	273
	Acknowledgements	285

## Foreword

*by Rabbi Naftali Schiff with Jonathan Kalmus*

A starved, enslaved and beaten teenage boy surviving six major Nazi concentration camps is nearly unheard of. This book is already unique for that alone, and it will keep you asking – How? How an orphan, alone, surviving by stealing potato peels and scraps, humiliated by his captors who’ve murdered his entire family, resists the precipice of Nazi degradation by maintaining his humanity with a mantra: ‘I must not become an animal like *them*.’ Could a person do any more? He does. Although emaciated, he protests against cruelty by finding the compassion to risk his life and feed fellow starving prisoners. An entire barracks of them. That he also rebuilds his life after the Second World War, we could be fooled into thinking this story’s beautifully powerful messages have a simple arc. How this same boy swaps his striped camp pyjamas for a United States army intelligence uniform to net the most infamous mass murderer of Nazi Germany is the stuff of epics. Meet Josef.

There are rare moments in relatively few people’s lives when they discover something that almost no one else in the world knows, but should be brought to the world’s attention. When I met Josef Lewkowicz and heard about his mostly unknown story in 2018, I knew it must be told. Josef repeatedly proclaims, ‘I am a zero, not a hero.’ Yet he brought to justice the

most well-known concentration camp commandant, Amon Goeth, made infamous by the film *Schindler's List*. The eminent historian Professor David Crowe describes Goeth as 'one of the true monsters in Nazi Germany's devastating war against the Jews'. But exactly how he was unmasked after the Second World War has hitherto been shrouded in mystery.

Josef has a near flawless memory of his role in this critical history. But he possessed not a single document of evidence to prove it. Only an intriguingly unique photograph of that Nazi mass murderer under arrest, which no museum, archive or anyone else in the world seemed to have. This, along with a portrait of Oskar Schindler, signed by the man himself to 'my dear friend Josef'.

The breakthrough to prove Josef's story should be credited to the work of Jonathan Kalmus. A filmmaker, journalist and colleague, he sifted through 100,000 documents to build the essential evidence base to historically verify Josef's past. Jonathan should also be solely credited for the new history unveiled in this book about the capture, identification and eventual trial of Amon Goeth.

But it was the book's author, Michael Calvin, who has diligently woven this research with artful brilliance into stunning historical storytelling, and greatly expanded it to produce a masterfully compelling and complete autobiography by adding the many other aspects of Josef's thankfully long life. The book is true to Josef's voice and spirit, and it has been an honour to see our idea for this work realized by a bestselling yet genuine and humble master wordsmith, whom I've come to know in Michael.

There is much more to Josef's story than solving an historic mystery. It shows he played a key part in defining our

humanity – how civilization responds to evil on a monstrous scale and how, we believe, we can collectively continue to keep millions of us safe from it in the future.

There is a terrifying alternate reality that almost happened after the Second World War but for the moral fortitude and daring shared by Josef and enough other people at the birth of an emerging post-war world order. The historical documents where Josef's story is found also lay bare how perilously close humanity came to never bringing any Nazi murderers to a true and fair trial at Nuremberg. The British favoured summary executions without trial, the Russians argued for show trials with weak evidence and predetermined verdicts. Had the American legal representatives not won the argument, by August 1945 the world would likely have never defined crimes against humanity, the rule of international law, or built the global consensus for the creation of universal human rights – some of the most important human values we take for granted today.

Amon Goeth and countless other mass murderers would likely have walked free without war crimes investigators gathering internationally recognized evidence for the newly created international criminal courts. The extent of the calculated, planned and scientific genocide that became known as the Holocaust would never have become one of history's most documented episodes, and so the Holocaust deniers of then and now would have won. We would have stood much closer to the precipice of other holocausts and much further away from the free, hate-free and equal societies we aspire to. That hope may never have been planted within us.

There is even more that humanity stands to gain beyond pivotal history. The more I have considered such survivors

my mentors, the more I realize they are all members of a unique cadre of human beings who have so much to teach us. Not just about death and destruction, but about life. To witness their *joie de vivre*, to cherish life and to fight evil with goodness. To miraculously rebuild lives and families after so much tragedy. When you discover his story, you'll see Josef is unique among a unique group of people, so how much more we stand to gain from absorbing his view of life.

As the founder of JRoots, I have dedicated nearly twenty years to help people learn from the stories of survivors. Tens of thousands of young adults have walked with them the paths of Auschwitz and other places of death, but they have also been inspired by the many more places and personal stories of rich life, heroism and heritage before these were destroyed. I know of no more powerful way to ensure a positive future than bringing the next generation to pause their busy lives and really consider the lessons of both the dark past and positive history. But survivors are getting rarer as they age. It was while capturing on film the stories of over a hundred Holocaust survivors in our hope to save their wisdom for future generations that I discovered Josef. Convincing him to give an interview was not easy. Holocaust survivors, I've learned, don't beat around the bush in speaking their minds, and Josef was not unique in this, to say the least. But I implored him to help future generations share his unique humanity, because his survival is witness to the endurance of the human spirit that should prevail in every one of us.

Josef is as bright and shining a living example of this human spirit as we have ever had the privilege to know. In this book you will touch the wonder of his resilience and tenacity, his desire for revenge manifested as yearning to build

## FOREWORD

a better future or save orphaned children. He reveals piercing moral clarity, a sense of duty, and he ascribes much of his endurance to a belief in helping others. As Josef will often say in Polish, ‘Being fine, kind and nice will never make you lose.’ It saved his life many times over. These are all values he learned as a child, from his mother, from the prevalent Jewish values upon which countless homes were built in the villages, towns and shtetls of Jewish Europe. They are values not for then, but for all time – that if Josef can forge a path in the face of overwhelming adversity, we can too. If Josef can stand up and be counted in history to uphold the values of justice, peace and universal morals with nothing but rags on his back and sheer determination, then we can and we must. It is our hope that anyone who reads this book will not put it down after the last page, but will carry and live Josef’s example for the sake of all of our futures.



**Copyrighted Material**

## Prologue: Ghosts

Yet if I speak, my pain is not relieved;  
and if I refrain, it does not go away.

*Job 16:6*

I am no hero. I'm afraid I am about to collapse. I sigh deeply and sag forward, as if I have been punched in the stomach. I weep, when I thought I had no more tears to shed. My heart is breaking. It has taken me nearly eighty years to summon the courage to come to this accursed place, where a field of crushed boulders and small stones, black, grey and tainted by death, acts as a grave marker.

Oak trees, retained when the firs planted by the Nazis to camouflage mass murder were torn down in disgust by advancing Soviet troops, line the ridge. It is raining gently. An icy wind blows from the east. The perimeter of the site, no bigger than three football pitches, contains human ashes and pulverized bone, mixed with sand. Some 600,000 Jews met their end here, between March and December 1942.

Belzec extermination camp.

The very name terrified me as an adult, just as Hitler's name frightened me as a child. My mother, Sheindel, and my three younger brothers, Meir Wolf, Hershl Zvi and Dovid

Leib, were sent there by a random flick of an SS officer's whip. Like around 15,000 others, transported from our shtetl, our home village of Dzialoszyce in south-east Poland, they never came out.

I vowed I would never visit, but their souls called out to me. They are among millions who have no cemetery, no tombstone, no record of their existence beyond personal memory. They had dreams, loves, lives they were not allowed to live. They tell us what happened to our people, our nation. They died for a single crime, being born Jewish. Can we understand how such a thing can happen in our world?

We must.

On that bleak late winter's day, when the rain melted the last of the snow, I found strength in a sacred duty. The children of the deceased have an obligation to say Kaddish prayers, a cornerstone of Judaism. It is an act of hope that allows mourners to praise God, acknowledge their grief, and to reinforce their belief that they will see their loved ones again.

I lit candles in remembrance of a beautiful, kind woman, and three sweet boys, cupping them to protect the flames before placing them in glass jars. I honoured my extended family of 150 individuals, all consumed by the Holocaust. As the sole survivor, it was my responsibility to bear witness, to give voice to the voiceless, the unspoken and the unknown.

I sensed their spirit, their *neshama*. I closed my eyes tightly, bowed my head, and recited: 'May God's great name be praised throughout all eternity. Glorified and celebrated, lauded and praised, acclaimed and honoured, extolled and exalted ever be the name of thy Holy One, far beyond all song and psalm, beyond all hymns of glory which mortals can offer. And let us say: Amen.'

I am ninety-six, and ready to meet my God whenever He calls me. I thought I was hardened by everything I had been through. I have seen terrible things: ritual hangings, casual shootings, unspeakable cruelty and the depravity of cannibalism. I endured hunger, beatings and torture in six camps, and managed to prevail, so I could bring a monster, Amon Goeth, the butcher of Plaszow, to justice.

He pursues me in a recurring nightmare, screaming that he will kill me because I stumbled into his room when he was eating. I hide in the shadows under a bridge, or cower under the barracks, to save myself. Sometimes Goeth, mainly remembered these days as the sadistic commandant from the film *Schindler's List*, materializes as one of many distorted Nazi faces, swooping towards me like birds of prey. On other mornings I wake panting and sweating, after grappling with a helmeted SS man in a long overcoat. He is trying to shoot me; I am trying to wrestle the rifle out of his grasp.

I am conditioned to violence, whether real or imaginary. I lived in constant fear, became used to danger and degradation. I am a proud Jew, who helped save Jewish orphans after the war. But I broke down at Belzec when I mentioned the names of those I see in my favourite dream, when I am around the dinner table with my family, talking and singing.

My father Symcha is supervising grandparents, aunts and uncles. I know their names, although I struggle to remember some of their stories. I have been giving my brothers rides on my beloved tricycle. I see our mother approaching with steaming plates of food, chicken soup, stuffed fish and cheese pastries. I fall silent, in anticipation. We are allowed to serve ourselves; it is delicious. I would love more, although I am normally a poor eater, but hold myself back.

When I look around, I realize no one at the table has a face. They are silhouettes, ghosts at the feast.

I consider this a happy dream, but perhaps that is why I was so troubled on the way to their place of execution. I remember my mother's warmth and elegance but, to this day, cannot recall her physical features. Despite going through the records at Yad Vashem, the National Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Jerusalem, I do not know the specifics of how she and my three brothers died.

There are lists of displaced villagers, and liquidated towns, but most documentation was deliberately destroyed. Railway records of the time were notoriously unreliable. Only two prisoners survived Belzec. One, Chaim Hirszman, was assassinated in his apartment in the Polish town of Lublin by anti-communist resistance fighters in March 1946, before he was able to provide first-hand testimony.

The other, Rudolf Reder, was saved because of his knowledge of German. He masqueraded as a mechanic before escaping under cover of darkness at the end of November 1942. He changed his name to Roman Robak before spending three years in Israel from 1950, and died in Toronto in 1977, at the age of ninety-six. He wrote of women and children suffocating, as their cries 'became one long, horrifying scream'.

We know the condemned were herded into cattle trucks. Some cars were said to have had piped music, to deceive deportees into thinking they were being transported to a transit camp. Others were connected to motor engines on arrival, so that victims could be gassed with the minimum of fuss. Historians consider Belzec to be a textbook example of the Final Solution, in action. The camp was run by only twenty-three SS men, supported by vicious Ukrainian guards.

The site measures 270 metres on each side. An overgrown railway siding still leads 500 metres from the main station directly to the camp, which was split into two sections. One zone was used to store victims' clothes, and such valuables as diamonds, US dollars and gold, extracted from the teeth of corpses. The other, hidden by fir fronds woven through barbed wire, held the gas chambers and burial pits.

The two zones were connected by a narrow fenced-off path, *der Schlauch*, the Tube. Victims, taken from batches of twenty freight cars and ordered over a loudspeaker on disembarkation to prepare to undress, were forced to run along the Tube by screaming guards, who prodded them with rifle butts and bayonets. The aim was to give them no time to think, to absorb where they were and what was about to befall them.

They had been told on arrival that they were to be showered as part of the adjustment procedure. They were advised to tie their laces together, so their shoes would not be lost. They were encouraged to arrange their clothes in neat piles, so they could easily be retrieved. It was a grotesque, murderous lie.

The Tube led directly to the gas chambers. Once the doors were sealed, trapping up to 200 people at a time, auxiliary police guards started a large diesel engine, which funnelled carbon monoxide into the brick-built building. All were dead within thirty minutes; from reception to death the process took little more than an hour.

*Sonderkommandos*, groups of Jewish prisoners selected to remain temporarily alive as forced labourers, removed the bodies and hauled them towards mass graves with leather straps. They were quickly covered with a shallow layer of earth. All the while, music was played by a small orchestra formed by temporarily reprieved prisoners.

Around 80,000 Jews were killed in the first three months of operation. By the time my relatives arrived, in September 1942, six gas chambers, double the original number, were in use. It was a production line of death. Heinrich Himmler, the genocidal mastermind, had declared that all Jews were to be wiped off the face of the Earth.

From October onwards bodies were exhumed, tossed on pyres made from railway sleepers, and doused in petrol. Bones were collected, crushed, and thrown into ditches that once served as tank traps. The slave labourers were periodically murdered; the last 300 were gassed in the Sobibor extermination camp in late June 1943, having been told they were being evacuated to Germany.

No buildings at Belzec remain, but the air of menace is unmistakable. Generations have passed through since the war, but people still struggle to grasp what occurred there. I walked down a symbolic death road, an underground passageway designed to replicate the hopelessness of that final panic-stricken stumble along the Tube. The high, rough walls closed in; I felt as if I was alone in the Valley of Death.

It was powerful, very powerful.

I cannot forget those beautiful people who were once around me. My cousins; there were so many of them. Little Bluma Kroner, the girl with the red hair. I did not know what her father did, but he was rich, the first man in the shtetl to have an open-topped car. When he gave us a ride, I felt like an ancient emperor.

Once the Nazis rounded us up, I never saw them again. If I close my eyes I can still visualize them, but it hurts so much. I don't like to think about loss, but it enters my mind, especially when I am alone. Grief taunts me. I cannot remember

my mother's voice, or her particular smell. I only have a vague sense of guilt that I defied her by giving my sandwiches away to poorer pupils at school. We should have run away, but why? We had been there for a thousand years. We were rooted there.

We had a happy life, surrounded by friends, siblings, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Everyone would come to our home. Some would bring candy; one aunt, in particular, gave us home-made sauerkraut. What became of them? I had so much to learn from them and I missed it all. They did not live long enough for me to get to know them well.

They did not live long enough for me to know myself.



**Copyrighted Material**

## Family

The lady mayor was polite, but firm. There was no Jewish cemetery in Dzialoszyce, my birthplace. She sympathized with my plight in trying to locate the grave of my great-grandfather, but could offer no help. As is so often the case in Poland, where darker secrets are protected by half-truths and mysteries, things were not as they seemed.

I knew my mind was not playing tricks. Children of my age, eight at the time in 1934, were not normally allowed to witness burials. But I was so close to my great-grandfather that I was given special permission to be there when he was laid to rest in late afternoon on the day he died in his sleep, just before *Pesach*, Passover eve. No one was quite sure whether he was 105 or 106.

Dovid Leib – my youngest brother was named after him – was a tall, kind-faced man with a long white beard which entranced me, since it danced in the wind. My great-grandfather wore a long black coat and a Yiddish *hittel*, a hat with a brim. I can still hear him saying: ‘Never in my life did even a fingernail hurt me.’ He died with a full set of teeth, perfect hearing, and no need for glasses or a walking stick.

He was living history.

He told me stories of the Polish kings, like Boleslaw II,

The Generous, Casimir III, The Great, and Władysław II Jagiełło, who awarded Działoszyce a city charter in 1409. Like his father, who also reached a great age, he passed down tales of anti-Semitic pogroms, starting with the 1648 Khmelnytsky Uprising, in which tens of thousands of Jews were slaughtered.

My great-grandfather lived through one such pogrom during the Russian Civil War that resulted in the deaths of at least 35,000 Jews at the hands of warlords, White Russians and Ukrainian nationalists. He personally knew Józef Piłsudski, the statesman regarded as the father of the multi-ethnic Second Polish Republic, which was re-established in 1918, 123 years after Partition. The tensions of those times are still felt today.

He was an old man with the heart of a young boy. We would spend long days on his farm, tending his two horses, checking on his tomatoes, and eating freshly picked beans from the vines. He would send me into the attic to collect warm, newly laid eggs from his chickens, and teach me how to make two holes in them and suck out the egg white, to rub into my eyes. It was probably a *bobbemeise*, an old wives' tale, but he was convinced it would do me good.

There is a Hebrew-based Yiddish word, *yichus*, meaning lineage, or bloodline, which expresses the significance of knowing where we come from, who we are, and what we represent. That is why it was so important to me to pay my respects to him in death. The fact that my parents and siblings had been denied a Jewish funeral gave strength to my search.

When I was born, on 21 July 1926, Jews formed 80 per cent of Działoszyce's population. They traded in grain, crops,

shoes, furniture, skins and clothes. Three tanneries, two oil wells, a brickyard and several tile kilns provided employment. Fairs, on Tuesdays and Fridays, attracted thousands of people from nearby villages and towns.

When I last returned, in 2019, it felt as if I had fallen into a black hole. The roofless shell of the neo-classical Adas Yisroel Synagogue, erected in 1852 and completed in 1876, still stood, but external plaster had crumbled, exposing scarred brickwork. It was colonized by pigeons, which flew noisily through arches that once housed majestic stained-glass windows.

In its heyday it was a beautiful place, with paintings of gold stars on beams, set against a light blue background. Pictures of the twelve tribes of Israel were painted on metal and garlanded with flowers. Paintings of a deer, a lion, a tiger and an eagle were at the edge of the ceiling on the four corners of the hall. Nothing remains. Immediately after the Second World War, in a casual act of desecration, the synagogue was used to store coal, cement and building materials.

I peered through the latticework of locked iron doors and tried to transport myself back in time, to when I sat on benches, *davening*, praying with my father and his father, Jankel, a deeply religious man who was the third of Dovid's four sons. Jankel's wife Esther, my grandmother, was similarly pious; she studied *Tsena Urena*, the women's Bible, and would make butter and cheese after milking Dovid's cows.

So much had changed. The surrounding scrubland added to the sense of decay and to my disorientation, as an old man seeing things from long ago in a different light. Frightening childhood memories of a large river flowing nearby, with a waterfall, which fed the shtetl's only well, were challenged by

the realization that it has subsided into a shallow, slow-running minor river, known as the Sancygniówka.

I was compelled to return to the river, to make a blessing for my life, because I had fallen in as a boy, from two loose boards, which acted as a makeshift bridge. I could not swim, started to struggle, and swallowed a lot of water. There was no one around to help; to this day I do not know how I managed to scramble out.

The area was prone to flooding. Działoszyce was cut off for eight days in 1936, when the Sancygniówka and the Jakubówka, another river, burst their banks following a cloudburst. Twenty-eight houses were washed away, 130 more were seriously damaged, and six residents drowned. Our house had been flooded to a depth of two metres several years earlier; my parents placed me on top of a wardrobe for safekeeping. For some reason, I still have an image of a ceiling floating by outside, with the light fitting attached.

The solution to the mystery of my great-grandfather's resting place in the graveyard lay in the obliteration of all aspects of the local Jewish community during, and immediately after, the Holocaust. I discovered, after my initial return in 2011, that the cemetery had been wilfully abandoned by Polish residents, who harboured both guilt and grudges. Gravestones dating back to the early eighteenth century had been destroyed.

It became so overgrown it was inaccessible, which, to be charitable, explained the lady mayor's ignorance. At least, I now learn, some kind soul has managed to penetrate the weeds, and place commemorative plaques on tree trunks. The people they honour may be shrouded by the fog of time past, but they deserve to be remembered. May their memory be a blessing.

My grandparents spoke Yiddish, Polish, Russian and German. They had little, but gave freely. My grandfather, for instance, distributed milk, purchased from the *poretz*, a feudal landowner, to the poor, who could pay him only a fraction of what it was worth. His brother Aaron, an estate manager, was so successful he was able to afford a four-horse carriage, the equivalent of today's Rolls Royce. He would give me chocolate treats, and provided support for the extended family.

For someone known by a number in the camps, I have had many names. My given name is Joseph, or Josef, but I was called Juzek or Josek in Polish and Jossel or Yossaleh in Yiddish. In later life, in South America and Canada, I was known as José, or Joe. It all depended where I was living at the time. The original family surname was Lewkow. The 'icz' came much later, and is associated with 'son of'. 'Lew' means 'heart', but also hints at a link to the Jewish tribe of Levi.

It is strange how things turn out; many years later, on a visit to Israel, I was amazed to run into a stranger who told me he had been at my circumcision ceremony, eight days after my birth. I had apparently been named after a learned Torah scholar, Rabbe Yoskele. I yearned to know more, but when I returned to Israel, two years later, I discovered the man had passed away. His reminiscences had never been recorded. Yet another small but significant piece of our heritage had been lost.

My father, Symcha, was born in 1899. He was the eldest sibling, an only son. Hannah, the youngest of his three sisters (the others were Sheindel and Pearl), died at an early age from tuberculosis. He tried, and failed, to avoid conscription into the Polish army during the latter stages of the First World War by deliberately injuring his leg.

Resistance to military service runs in the family. In the 1950s fate delivered me to a great-uncle, Israel, a fun-loving man who had run away nearly forty years earlier. He had built a new life in South America because he did not want to join the Polish army.

My father spoke little about his combat activities, in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Germany, but had taken the precaution of becoming engaged to my mother, Sheindel, before going to the front. Her fine features hinted at her French ancestry, but she was born in Dzialoszyce in 1902 and was considered the greatest catch in the community.

I hope you forgive me the indulgence of providing a thumbnail sketch of her qualities. It means a lot to me, as a dutiful son, doing my best to bring her back to life through my words and deeds. In addition to her natural beauty, she made the most of a good education, being an avid reader in Polish and Hebrew. She was able to do rapid mathematical calculations in her head, without the need for a pencil to take notes.

Clothes looked good on her, though she was very particular about little things, like the angle at which she wore her hat. She had a passion for well-made shoes, usually those manufactured by her brothers, Leibish and Yossel, ultra-orthodox Jews who ran a successful export business. I used to play hide and seek with my friends in their factory, which smelled of fresh leather.

She could be very stubborn, both a blessing and a curse that she passed down to me, but was quietly spoken, warm and kind. I continue to try to live up to her instruction: *‘Na grzeczności nikt nie traci.’* ‘By being nice to others you will only win.’ Her caring side probably came from her mother,

Pearl, who was a prominent *shidduchim*, matchmaker, in the neighbourhood.

I miss my mother every day, and still mourn the misappropriation of her pride and joy, a needlepoint of Adam and Eve in paradise, which was stunning in its detail and creativity. It took her many nights of careful, loving work to complete and it adorned the main wall of our house which, as you will learn later in the book, was stolen from us.

Her father, Yitzhak Isaac, made a good living. He manufactured quilts and pillows from fine goose feathers, collected in large sacks by a network of pluckers in surrounding towns and villages. He also used duck down in a range of other products, finished off at my grandfather's factory. That was the way of things: family came first, especially when it was strengthened by marriage.

My parents went through a formal ceremony at the *shul*, the synagogue. I can't be certain where the wedding feast was held, because the guests were part of our lost generation and the details died with them, but it was either in the local fire station or a grand municipal building. The food would have been simple, but plentiful.

As a child I loved the joy and pageantry of such occasions, where a Chasidic band would play *klezmer* dance music until the early hours, when the men would still be dancing in circles. The wedding procession became a community event: doors would be flung open in appreciation as the caravan of colourful horse-drawn wagons came past, with guests singing Hebrew and Yiddish songs. These are the tunes of the sages, songs for the ages.

I love singing, though friends are probably being too kind when they tell me I have a good voice. I love the stories the