
TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

“When this is all over, the world will find it hard to believe that it really happened,” a Jewish historian is quoted as saying in the camps. He did not live to find out how truly prophetic his words were. Detractors have tried to question and deniers to deny that such atrocities could have happened in 20th century Europe and be perpetrated by a civilized nation such as Germany was. But it is, in fact, because of where and when it happened—because a country like Germany could be turned into a state of unimaginable genocide in the middle of the 20th century—that memoirs like these continue to be important, more than 65 years after the end of World War II. The Holocaust was the harbinger for things to come. The legacy of the Holocaust has been a century of unparalleled violence and the disregard for human rights and human life.

At the same time, the Holocaust is a unique period in history, one which is not comparable to any other instance of genocide this world has seen. Surviving in an extermination camp such as Auschwitz was not an option for Jews; death was a certainty. It came swiftly for some and despairingly slow for others. This unimaginable place was so unlike anything that has ever existed on this planet; it remains as unreal today as it did to those whose destiny it became all those years ago and those who lived to try to describe it. In this depository of nations, people were pitted against each other by ethnicity and religion as well as ancient hatreds. The murderous oppressors bought loyalty and collaboration by dispensing favors and higher standing. The Jews were brought to Auschwitz after a period of deprivation, deception, and dehumanization, most to be put to death upon arrival. Those left alive as slaves suffered hardships beyond endurance: hunger, harsh elements, illness, and cruel beatings. At the end, death was always looming. Fear and worry about loved ones added to the state of despair. It was easier to give up than to carry on. No one knows how much courage it took to do either, unless one was there. My father was there and he knew. As was I.

My father wrote his memoir of Auschwitz in late 1945 and 1946, with the experiences of the camp still fresh in his mind. He was then 48 years old. He wrote what he saw and heard around him: human stories as diverse and different as people are, human behavior from the highest and most noble to the lowest and most base. He chose to write in Yiddish, the language used by and accessible to the Jewish communities living in countries around the world for whom his record was intended. This was the language of his and preceding generations, which provided a link between the widely dispersed Jews of the Diaspora¹. But things were changing. The younger generation was not using Yiddish, but rather the language of the surrounding culture in which they were being educated. This process was accelerated after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, when Hebrew again became a living language.

Before the war, the Eiger family had lived in the city of Radom for generations. Radom, a town of about 100,000 with a Jewish community numbering 25,000, was an industrial city 60 miles from Warsaw. My father was a successful accountant, a well-respected member of the Jewish community and the community-at-large. Our small family was made up of my parents, my brother David, and myself. My father was a man of moderation and conciliation, quietly assertive and persuasive. His counsel and advice were widely sought, both professionally and privately. He was a renaissance man, a writer and an artist. He could build things from scraps; he could fix anything. He was a teacher and lifelong learner. He was fluent in Polish, Yiddish, German, Hebrew and later in English, and conversant in French and Russian.

My fondest memories from childhood run like a video in my mind. We spent summers in Garbatka, a village not far from Radom, with many of our friends. On Friday afternoons, all the kids went to the little railroad station to greet the fathers arriving from the city for the weekends. For us, the Eiger kids, my father's arrival signaled non-stop fun. He took us swimming in the village pond and, like a pied piper, he led a bunch of us kids on nature hikes. We picked

1 A derivative of German, evolved in the Middle Ages in Central Europe, Yiddish was the everyday language of the tightly clustered Jewish communities, while Hebrew continued to exist as the language of the holy scripts used by scholars, teachers and clergy. Yiddish uses the Hebrew alphabet written from right to left. The spoken language is mostly colloquial and very expressive, full of idioms for every situation. In time, the German became more distant and words from the various surrounding cultures crept in, as well as a substantial amount of Hebrew. A large body of Yiddish literature, newspapers, and magazines was created. Texts were translated from Hebrew into Yiddish, as were works in other languages, religious and secular. With the mass migration of Jews to the United States and elsewhere, the use of Yiddish spread to America, Canada, Argentina, Australia, and Israel. Among the best-known literary figures who wrote in Yiddish was Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer.

wildflowers and dried them, pressed between pages of discarded magazines, to bring back to school in the fall. My father knew the names of the flowers and the trees from which the leaves came. Most exciting were the few times he took us deep into the woods with baskets to pick wild berries and mushrooms. He taught us to recognize the edible from the potentially poisonous. At the end of the day we returned to the cabins tired, happy, and full of anticipation as our mushrooms were cooked for supper. Recapturing these precious memories brings a smile to my face all these years later, but it also reopens the deep wound in my heart.

The freedom of my youth and the carefree pre-war years ended abruptly when Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and marched into Radom the following week. As my father describes so poignantly in the first pages of this memoir, he was arrested by the Gestapo on the night of April 28, 1942, along with about 200 other leaders of the Jewish community in Radom. We were awakened at four o'clock in the morning by volleys of machine gun fire. And then came the knock on the door and the German command to open. I was numb. My father had an inflammation of his sciatic nerve at the time, and was walking with a cane, which he was allowed to take with him. We were terrified. The machine gun fire outside was persistent, and we were sure he was dead. My mother, brother, and I waited in terror, unable to even communicate, until the curfew hour was lifted and we could try to ascertain what had happened. My mother told David, then 19 years old, to go out to get some information. He heard from bystanders that many people had been killed, and went to the hospital in the ghetto to search the dead bodies that had been laid out. Luckily, my father was not among the dead, a sign that he had been taken to Gestapo headquarters. A day later we heard that they had been shipped to Auschwitz.

At the beginning of August 1942, the mass deportation of Jews from Radom took place, at which time my entire extended family, with the exception of my mother, David, and myself, was deported to Treblinka and killed. The three of us were kept in a forced labor camp just outside the city until July 1944, when we, my mother and I, were separated from my brother, who was sent to a camp in Western Germany. My mother and I came to Auschwitz on August 6, 1944, where we found that my father was alive and well. In January 1945, after a three-day death march, my mother and I were brought to Bergen-Belsen, where we were finally liberated on April 15 by British troops. The four of us were reunited in August of 1945.

My father and brother came to the United States in 1949, and after completing my education in Germany, I followed with my husband Jules in 1950. (Having survived the war, my mother died in Germany in 1948, at age 50.) We settled in Minneapolis, and began our lives over again. The years that followed were busy ones, raising families and establishing ourselves professionally and in the community. While the experiences of the Holocaust were ever-present for us, and we talked about it within our family, for American Jews, the subject was still taboo. My father never even told us that he had written about his experience. When we went through his papers after he died in 1960, we found three type-written copies of a manuscript, composed on an old Yiddish typewriter that he had left behind in Germany. We didn't know quite what to do with it. David and I each kept a copy, and in 1968, when my husband and I took a trip to Israel, we delivered the third copy to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, to add to their growing archives. Years passed, and periodically I thought about the manuscript. But life was busy. It wasn't until my children were grown and had left home that I returned to the document and decided to begin translating it. It was early in the 1980's.

Although fluent in Yiddish, it had been a long time since the language was fresh on my tongue. The copy was difficult to read, so I decided to transliterate it first into Latin script, then use the transliteration, which I could read more quickly, to translate into English. I was still working, but I made time for the translation project as often as I could. It took nearly two years to translate the whole thing. I should pause here to thank Barbara Impagliazzo, a wonderful friend who volunteered to transfer my handwritten translation to the computer. She was the first person with whom I ever shared my father's words, and without her this memoir would never have been completed.

Having finished the translation, I realized that it could not possibly be complete. The type-written account ended abruptly in the fall of 1942, two and a half years before my father was liberated. There had to be more of the manuscript. I searched through my papers, but found nothing, and David's investigation of his papers similarly came up empty. We had in our files many other pages from my father, but nothing typed; only hand-written stories on loose sheets of paper. I was sure there had to be more, but not finding anything, gave up looking.

When David died in 1994, I went through his papers, thinking that perhaps he had missed something. But again I found no typewritten pages that matched the first section of the manuscript. I thought there was only one other place to look: Yad Vashem. Perhaps I had given them a complete copy in 1968. The

intervening years were difficult ones, and I did not get to Yad Vashem again until 2006, but the copy they had was the same as ours. Later that year, during a visit to Minneapolis, my nephew Martin brought over more files he had found at my brother's house, full of my father's papers. I spent hours looking through the files, but all I could find was more hand-written pages, nothing typed that matched the earlier manuscript. I had reached the end of the road, I thought. I decided to send the rest of the papers to Yad Vashem, certain I would never find the end of the memoir, thinking, even, that perhaps there was no conclusion.

In the fall of 2007, I was preparing to box the papers to send to Yad Vashem, and decided to take one last look before I was finished with the project. When I looked at the handwritten pages of Yiddish, one word caught my eye. I rushed to take out my transliterated copy, and there it was. This was the entire memoir. A thick package of handwritten pages, ordered and numbered, that he apparently had never finished typing. It was almost a mystical experience, as if my father really wanted me to find those papers. I was excited and elated, as were my children and grandchildren.

But now, 25 years after finding the first part of the memoir, my situation was different. A debilitating disease had affected my vision; I was now legally blind. I have a reading machine, which can substantially enlarge any script, but I still had severe difficulties with both reading and writing. With the encouragement of my children and grandchildren, I decided to make every effort to devise a system that would enable me to complete the translation.

My father's manuscript was handwritten in pen, in his beautiful Hebrew script, on narrow sheets of paper no more than four or five inches wide. The paper was fragile, very poor quality, and had yellowed with age. The reading machine enlarged the tiny script to about an inch and a half tall, enabling me to read it, although each page took two hours to transcribe. As I had done previously, I set out first to transliterate it. There were many hurdles to overcome. I could not use a dictionary or thesaurus, whose words are too small for me to read. As I wrote the translation, using heavy, felt-tipped pens and large letters, it was still very difficult for me to go back and read what I had written. My wonderful family stepped in to help, looking up words and reading my translation back to me so I could make changes.

I was very anxious to finish the project, and went about it in a disciplined manner. I set myself a goal of transliterating two pages and translating two pages each day, which meant working at the project for eight hours a day. Some days I accomplished more than others. Sometimes I would stay up late into

the night in order to finish that day's work. I set myself a goal of completing the manuscript in a year. I began working in December 2007, and finished in October of the following year.

I couldn't have finished this project without the encouragement and help that I received from many people. My deep gratitude goes to my daughter Rosanne and son Gary; my wonderful grandchildren, Etan, Tamar, Anat, Jonah, and Gabriel, for their love and devotion. They read the memoir, offering their comments and suggestions, and also worked to edit the manuscript that you are now holding. My grandson Jonah deserves special acknowledgement for his abiding commitment and for encouraging me to persevere, and lovingly prodding me when my resolve flagged. After all these years, my friend Barbara Impagliazzo again agreed to type this part of the manuscript on the computer and is still the first person to have read the entire memoir.

An inscription on one of the many memorials in Dachau reads: *Den toten zur ehre, den lebenden zur mahnug*—"To honor the dead, to warn the living." As my father writes in his introduction, this is the purpose of this memoir. It is my hope that by completing this translation, I have remained true to the legacy of his original words.

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