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FOREWORD

There was a time when historians deprecated the value of memoirs. Only written documents, they argued, could be relied upon for serious research purposes. Only documents, they contended, told the true story. Today we know that this is not the case. Memoirs expose the reader to a textured, nuanced, and personal history of an event or era. While memory can be capricious, and two individuals can remember the same moment differently, historians have learned to use memoirs to gain a better understanding of what a particular moment was like. This is all the more true in the case of persecution. Generally, the victims do not have the opportunity to amass a cache of official documents which provide the details of their experience. In this situation, of course, the documents we do have are a reflection of events through the prism of the persecutor. This obviously skews our knowledge and perspectives of the situation.

This is particularly the case in relation to the Holocaust. Memoirs, diaries, and letters written by Jews both during and after the Holocaust expose us to an aspect of this history which documents cannot. As Elie Wiesel has observed, “What survivors can say, nobody else can. . . . They have a knowledge of what happened, of who died and of who bears responsibility.” We cannot write a history based on memoirs alone, but now we know that we cannot write a history without them.

In *My Reconstructed Life*, Eugen Schoenfeld tells the improbable story of his life. He was born in a small shtetl in the Carpathian Mountains and ended up a professor of Sociology at Georgia State University. The fact that a small boy from this background would become a professor is noteworthy in and of itself. What makes it remarkable, however, is that between one axis of his life—his youth in a small Jewish community in Hungary’s mountains—and the other—his distinguished career at a state university—he endured and survived the Holocaust. Though each life is uniquely valuable, the course of Schoenfeld’s life reminds us of the tremendous intellectual and professional losses perpetrated by the Holocaust.

Professor Schoenfeld has wisely chosen to include more than just the details of those terribly traumatic years. He places his experience during the Holocaust within the context of his life before and after. He explains that he felt compelled to write this book because he wanted to “seek those inner forces” which helped him reestablish his life “after the devastation.” This part of the story, though far more ordinary, is as compelling as what happened to him during the Holocaust. No matter how many survivors I meet, I continue to be amazed at their resiliency and ability, not only to reconstruct their lives, but to add new and compelling chapters to it.

Professor Schoenfeld stresses, as do virtually all other survivors, that survival was “a matter of luck.” Many victims who had a compelling desire to survive did not. But what happened to the survivors afterwards was not simply a matter of luck. In order for them to reconstruct their lives, they had to draw upon wellsprings of inner strength and healing. In this memoir, Professor Schoenfeld shares with readers not only his descent into the abyss but his ability to rise up from it and build a new and vibrant life.

Over the many years that I have taught courses about the Holocaust, I have learned that the most compelling moment comes when survivors speak in the first person singular, when they say: “This is my story. This is what happened to me.” Soon those voices will be gone. The tyranny of the clock mandates that it will be so. That is why it is so important that Professor Schoenfeld and increasing numbers of other survivors give us the gift of their personal recollections.

We are grateful for these memoirs and their portrayal of life before, during, and after the Holocaust.

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PREFACE

Akavya, the son of M'halel, suggests that if one contemplates the following three factors one will not sin: Know from where you come, to where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an accounting. I would like to paraphrase Akavya's statement to read: Contemplate where you came from and where you are going, and then you will understand yourself. I have attempted indeed to contemplate on my past and how my experiences have influenced my decisions in regards to my future. I began this task many years ago because I wished to tell my children and future generations something about myself, so that it may help them understand their own existence, which I hope will be rooted in our common heritage.

I have often asked students who were enrolled in my class on the sociology of ethnicity to tell me of their ethnic and cultural background. Very few knew from where their parents and grandparents came. So many of them, the students informed me, wished to have known something about their parents' and great grandparents' origins. They felt that there was something essential missing that kept them from truly rooting themselves in a past. They felt that both their ontological and existential selves would have been more complete should they have been knowledgeable about their roots. I hope that this book will provide my family of the present and future with this knowledge.

However, there is an even greater and universally more profound reason for this book. I am a person who not only experienced the devastation of the Holocaust but who also, like other survivors of this tragedy, had to rebuild my life. I hope to share some of my insights on how I resurrected myself as a person both physically and emotionally from the cataclysm.

My life's journey began in the culture of a shtetl; then I went through the darkness of a conflagration and became a social scientist in academia. My life and experience hence existed in two worlds: the religious world of a distant past and the secular world of the present. Shtetl life, even though it physically existed in the twentieth century, was closer philosophically and theologically to the medieval world than to modernity. I am still rooted simultaneously in these two worlds. In this sense, this book depicts the dialectic nature of my struggles to find a path between two disparate worlds.

I want to express my thanks to those who made the task of writing this book easier. I am indebted to Mel Hecker for his encouragement and to Laura Dabundo for her editorial help and encouragement. I dedicate this book to my wife Jean for fifty-five years of happiness, to my children, grandchildren, and great grandson who represent my triumph over Hitler, and to the memory of those whose lives were taken in the Holocaust—my mother Yocheved, my brother Benjamin, and my sister Esther.

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PROLOGUE

As usual, while my wife was shopping in one of the stores in one of America's modern marketplaces called shopping malls, I was perusing the stalls of the bookstore. Among the newly arrived photography books, I discovered Roman Vishniac's *A Vanished World*. Randomly I opened the book, and one glimpse of the page brought tears to my eyes. I became agitated as one usually does when confronting a long-lost memory. For on that page was the picture of my *Cheder*, the series of one room schools that resembled miniature townhouses. In my mind's eye, I was immediately transported back, as though I was in a time machine, to early 1930 when I was brought to this place at the age of five and turned over to the rabbi, the teacher who ruled his domain with a Bismarkian iron fist. His task was twofold: He was charged with indoctrinating me with the discipline of study and instruction in the holy language, Biblical Hebrew, so that I could fulfill the obligation of Jewish males to read the prayers and study the Torah. The rabbi's second task was to teach us the difficult path of being an observant Jew. We had to learn the ritual laws that guided a person's existence from the time one rose in the morning 'til one went to sleep. Later in our preteens, we were instructed from the book *Shulchan Aruch*, the authoritative guide to ritual performance.

I was shaken by the Vishniac book, for the pictures in it brought back memories of my hometown, Munkacs. This was my *shtetl*, my Jewish community and its people. There they were in the pages of the book: the rich and the paupers, the upright citizens and the city's fools. There was Meyer Tziz, whom I taunted, together with other merciless young people, by shouting at him "Kukuriku." I do not know why he reacted to this stimulus, but he did so violently. There was also Hershele Kakash, a mildly disposed dwarf with an extremely generous nature. Walking with his cane and his pocket stuffed full of paper, he was always ready to write a draft on the Jewish Bank for a million Czech kroner for anyone who asked him.

Looking at these pages, I confronted my vanished world. This was my world, my *shtetl*, my culture, my life that no longer exists—it is indeed a vanished world. It is not that the city disappeared. It still exists, now a part of Ukraine. What has vanished is its Jewish life. As I looked through the book I wished to resurrect it—to bring it back to life. I left Munkacs right after my return to it following liberation from internment in the

German concentration camps, and I have never returned. Munkacs and my life there are associated with good memories that I do not wish to alter by revisiting. I wish to remember it as it was and not as it is today, a city devoid of Jews.

In my forty years of teaching sociology, I have often talked to students about a peculiar relationship between immigrant parents and their children. It seems that second-generation Americans often wish to discard their parents' culture and their way of life. In fact, many children of immigrants have expressed disdain for their parents' way of life, which they considered to be un-American. Their children in turn (the third and fourth generation of Americans), *do* seek their roots and wish to know something about their past. Many students have declared to me, "I wish that my grandparents would have talked to me about their past." Indeed, my children in their youth were not very interested in my ancestral past or my experiences. Now in their middle age, they seem to be more receptive to my stories. I am writing this account of my life for them and for my grandchildren, hoping that by knowing their roots, they may establish greater stability in their lives.

For a long time I have neither spoken nor written about my life, especially about my Holocaust experiences. My silence was not due so much to my children's lack of desire to listen as to my own emotions. Ever since my arrival in the United States, people have been asking me to tell them about my experiences in the concentration camps. For thirty years I have been reluctant to talk about this experience. Perhaps it was the memory and the associated pain of having lost my family that kept me from relating my Holocaust experiences. But it is also quite possible that the reason for my hesitancy to speak is due to my sense of guilt for surviving. I was also reluctant to become a member of any survivors group, or for that matter, to be introduced—or better, displayed—as a survivor. On one occasion, thirty years after having settled in the United States, I was introduced at some public function as a survivor. Not only did I feel embarrassed by this introduction, but I also felt angry. I felt then, and I still do now, that being a survivor of the Holocaust is not an accomplishment. I survived mostly because I was lucky. I was embarrassed because I feel that I do not deserve, nor does any other survivor, to be singled out for any honor simply for having survived the ordeal of the Holocaust. Honors, I believed then as I do now, should be bestowed only upon those persons whose work and achievement have contributed to the well-being of the world.

But as I became older, I started to realize that the ordeal which I shared with so many others has socially significant meaning, and as such, it is important that I share these experiences with others.

In the last fifteen years, I have lectured about the Holocaust in public schools, colleges, churches, and at public forums. I am not relating my experiences and talking about the causes of the Holocaust in order to gain sympathy either for myself or for the Jewish people. And above all, I am not seeking to achieve honor for having survived the ordeal of the Holocaust. Rather, my aim is to make readers aware that, given certain conditions, holocausts under various guises and names can and will occur, even in the United States. My desire and hope is to share my limited knowledge with the audience and make them aware of the conditions that often precipitate hatred and persecution of minorities. For in the final analysis, only the people themselves can negate the power of governments who seek to implement any form of genocide.

The story of the Holocaust has many aspects. Many personal accounts have been written and movies have been made. But as I see it, these stories, books, and films have one common denominator—they all follow a Hollywood-like scenario. The story usually starts with the German occupation of whatever country in which the protagonist lives. This is followed by how Jews were gathered into ghettos from which they were transported by the infamous trains to various camps. The tales then proceed to describe various difficulties and troubles the protagonist experiences, such as separation and loss of family, illness, harsh labor, and so on. Finally, the tale comes to a happy ending, namely the liberation.

The true and lasting consequences of the Holocaust for those who survived the ordeal start with liberation. It is only after liberation that the survivors become aware of the enormity of their losses. It is only after liberation that we become aware that we are alone—without family, home, country, and, of course, income and work. We faced the enormous task of healing ourselves from the psychological devastation that we experienced, to reconstruct our lives and gain some semblance of normalcy. This is my story. I am quite aware that for the reader to understand fully the Holocaust, and with it the murder not only of millions of people but also a culture, I need to start by describing life in the pre-Holocaust years. No American could understand the scale of changes that we had to make unless I first make the reader aware of our lives in the Eastern European

shtetl. Only after this will I relate very briefly my life in the camps and then tell the story of my life after the camps and my attempt to reconstruct my life.

On May 2, 1945, I was reborn. On that date I was liberated from Muhlendorf Wald Lager, one of the many German concentration camps. I was freed by Lt. Schwartz, who appeared at the camp gate with a tank and a squad of U.S. soldiers. My fellow inmates and I, the survivors of years of internment, were jubilant. Hours before, the U.S. forces had arrived; the SS guards had gone, and we were able to move freely, although most of us were too weak to do so. However, a few days after our liberation, the initial feeling of joy that we had experienced abated. Instead, I began to experience a sense of anxiety. Most of us who survived, including my father and my other relatives, became fearful of what we would find when we returned to our hometowns. We talked about what we would do, where we would go. Above all else, we wondered with anxiety, of course, who among our immediate family had survived. The general mood that prevailed in the camp was fear and anxiety. What haunted us was the uncertainty of our future, the answer to the simple, yet difficult question: What now?

The day after liberation we, the survivors, were taken to a military hospital for treatment and recuperation. While all of us suffered from at least malnutrition, others had far more serious illnesses. There were those among the liberated whose condition had so deteriorated that they could not be saved. The rest of us, after gaining some weight and strength, were being repatriated, a euphemism for sending us back to the countries of our origins. Not all of the survivors went back to their pre-Holocaust homes. Having experienced the hostile attitudes of their non-Jewish neighbors, most of those who survived decided to seek entrance to other countries.

However, a month after liberation, I returned to my hometown, Munkacs, in the Carpathian region, formerly both Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Coming back to my hometown, once a thriving Jewish community, I found it mostly empty of Jews. The city I knew, and in which I grew up, a city I considered my hometown, seemed dead to me. The streets and buildings were the same, they hadn't changed, but the city itself was devoid of that which made it my hometown. My home, the house where I was born and spent my youth, was at my return, occupied by strangers. My family and friends were all gone and so were the almost 18,000 Jews who once called Munkacs home. The day after my arrival, I was also informed that Munkacs was now part of the

U.S.S.R. Were I to remain in the city, I would have to learn a new language, be a part of a new culture, and above all, live in a political system that I didn't like and among people and a regime that were hostile to Jews. I didn't want to be a part of a country that had a long history of anti-Semitism, one that supported pogroms, a semiofficial and sanctioned killing of Jews.

All these thoughts added to my sense of confusion, estrangement, and foreboding. I was in a state of shock, experiencing a condition that sociologists call anomie. I felt as though my life had lost its meaning, values, moral perspectives, and direction.

Although I returned to my birthplace, to the town of my youth, in my mind I was sure that this place held no future for me. I became quite aware that in little over a year, I was not only cut off from my past but also from the future that I had dreamed about. I had to pose this very difficult question: What shall I do now? My past, and with it my plans for my future that my parents and I had dreamed about, seemed not only unattainable but also meaningless. I knew that I had to reconstruct my life. I had to have new plans and a new direction.

I am sure that most of those who survived, like me, shared similar problems: the loss of family, wealth, home, future expectations, but above all else, the customs and traditions that in the last two millennia gave our lives a sense of direction and meaning. We survivors had to reconstruct our lives and perspectives. Not only did we need new plans for our future, we also needed a new world to live in and a new worldview by which we could interpret and make sense of our Holocaust experiences.

Most survivors, I suppose, were able to integrate their experiences into a new meaning system and find the motivation and strength to face life anew. How was that accomplished?

The story of the Holocaust and its survivors is not complete without examining and describing the spirit that helped them to reestablish a facsimile of a normal life. It is this facet of my life experiences that I wish to examine and record, to tell how I rebuilt my ego, my psyche, and my life. However, for the reader to understand the changes in my life and in me, I must begin with describing my life in a small town in the Carpathian Mountains. Paraphrasing the teaching of Akavya, the son of Mehalel, I must examine my past, the roots from where I hail, and only then will I understand and know where I am going. My present existence, my

worldviews, and my beliefs are the result of a combination of my life in Munkacs, my imprisonment in the concentration camps, and my post-Holocaust experiences. It is my pre-Holocaust past that helped me to rebuild my life after my liberation. Without examining my roots, neither I nor the reader will understand my views of life. Let me now turn to Munkacs, the cradle of my existence.

Note: Hebrew and Yiddish terms are defined where they appear in the text as well as in a glossary at the end of the book.