

My Silent Pledge:

A Journey of Struggle, Survival and Remembrance



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Sidney J. Zoltak



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*This book is dedicated
to my grandchildren,
Jason, Melissa and Matthew,
as my legacy,
and to the memory of their grandmother,
and my beloved wife of 53 years,
Ann Dickstein Zoltak*

Foreword



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 hidiers' 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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Prologue



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 (Semi-tych 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?

PART I

POLAND





Ghitke Zoltak
*Sidney's paternal
grandmother*



Yehoshua (Sidney) Zoltak
Age 14-15



Grandmother Rivka Kejles
and aunt Yitke Kejles
1938 Warsaw



Tarbut school
Kadima in Siemiatycze with school principal, Lerer Kogut



Yehoshua (Sidney) Zoltak
1934

CHAPTER ONE

Siemiatycze



*Kinderyorn, zise kinderyorn
Eybik blaybt ir vakh in mayn zikorn*

Childhood, sweet childhood
Forever do you remain in my memory

*Kinder Yorn/Childhood
—Mordecai Gebirtig*

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 Siemiatycze 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 Siemiatycze 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 Siemiatycze began in 1582. In 2004, Bozena Czerkas, a local schoolteacher, wrote about the vanished Jewish community of Siemiatycze 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 Siemiatycze ... (but) the life of the Jews in Siemiatycze was never as rich and dynamic as in the years 1918-1939. In 1938, there were 4,303 Jews living in Siemiatycze, 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 Siemiatycze 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 *Tzena 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 Siemiatycze 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 Siemiatycze 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.⁴

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 Młodzież*, 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 Gevirtz, 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 Yitzle's friend, and fellow *Shomrak*⁵. 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



store while my father looked after the buying and stocking of merchandise. To sell his wares, he travelled to various towns at least once a week. My mother remained in the store and was successful not only with her Jewish customers but the Polish ones as well. Because she had been brought up in a village, her Polish was perfect. This, along with her amiable personality, enabled her to develop very good relationships with the customers. When war broke out, these relationships were instrumental in saving our lives.

Although I remained an only child, I later learned that my mother had had one or more miscarriages after I was born. As a result, my parents overprotected me; I didn't have to share their love and devotion with other siblings. Physically, I was slender of build and not a good eater, at least not in my mother's opinion. She often had to bribe me with ice cream in order for me to finish a regular meal. I was also pampered by Bubeshie Ghitke and by my other grandparents, particularly by *Zeide*⁷ Froyke. My grandfather and I had a very special bond, a close relationship that continued until the day he died. I was his only grandson and Zeide Froyke was my only living grandfather. I loved him very much and felt his love for me as well. A man of stature, with a short, elegant beard, my Zeide was tall and strong. Even at his advanced age, he walked erect with his head held high. He had the biggest and warmest heart of anyone I have ever known.

Until the age of five, I had a great time visiting my grandparents in Grodzisk. My grandmother, Rivche, was a well-groomed, well-read, and worldly person whose intelligence showed on her face. However, she was something of a disciplinarian. She often remarked on my improper boyish behaviour. With Zeide Froyke, however, I could do no wrong.

My grandparents ran a general store and so both were busy yet Zeide always found time to take me to his neighbours' farms so that I could play with the animals. I loved the smell of the fields and examining all the different kinds of crops and plants, but I particularly loved the horses. I would be allowed to pat them gently and, sometimes, to hold the reins when the horses were harnessed. I also enjoyed retrieving eggs from the chicken-coop. Shie's daughters,



Chayale and Yentale, would sometimes also be visiting and, together, we would run around making the most of being free to explore. En route to my grandparents, we would sometimes take side trips. I remember visiting my grandmother Rivche's sister, Raizel Goldsztern, in the village of Makarki, less than ten kilometres from Grodzisk. At the time of my visits, four of their five children were still living at home while their oldest son was married and lived in Warsaw. My visits to their farm were always memorable but the time I helped make ice cream particularly stands out. When I came home, I told all my friends about the wonderful ice cream I had produced.

I also remember visiting my grandmother Rivche's brother, Velvel Levine. *Feter*⁸ Velvel lived with his wife, Tzipah, on a large farm in the village of Wjeska, situated on the west side of the Bug River, less than 25 kilometres from my hometown. To get there, we had to take a river barge. Crossing the river, what an adventure! *Feter* Velvel had eight children. One daughter, Ruchl, emigrated to the United States and the other seven, some of whom were married, never left Poland. A few lived with their parents on the farm. I have a vivid memory of the river crossing, of all the stalls in the barns and chicken-coops and the many animals. In May, it was customary for children to drink warm cow's milk. It was generally believed that warm milk extracted directly from the cow in that month was very healthy for children. Somehow, I still remember that.

However, the thing that I remember most from my last visit to Grodzisk was the new house my grandparents had built under the supervision of Uncle Shie. It was a modern and spacious one-storey house with large windows all around. I thought it was beautiful. A photograph of this house still exists because it was sent to my aunt and uncle in Montreal prior to the war. That photograph, rather than the actual memory, is probably why I can recall it. In the photo are my grandparents, my grandfather's brother-in-law, Menashe from Warsaw, my mother's sisters, Ruchl and Yitke, my cousin, Chayale and me—all standing in front of this new house. The photo is a precious family heirloom.

Of all the people in that photo, I am the only one still alive.

**Endnotes**

1. Bozena Czerkas, *Siemiatycki Kurier Samorządowy* (January 2004)
translated into English by Olga and Ben Sher
2. Grandma
3. A minor but joyous Jewish holiday
4. See note 1.
5. A member of the *Hashomer Hatzair*
6. Male doll
7. Grandfather
8. Uncle

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.

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