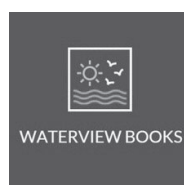


# MIRACLES THROUGH HELL

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A TRUE STORY OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVAL AND  
INTERGENERATIONAL HEALING

JERRY M. ELMAN





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*In honor of the partisans who fled and fought, those who hid in the forests, those who survived the death camps, and those who survived the pogroms after liberation.*

*In memory of the six million Jews who perished. They shall remain in our hearts and souls forever.*

*In memory of my parents, Shmeryl and Rochal Elman.*

*In memory of all my family members who survived and have since passed away.*

*In memory of all my family members who perished in the Holocaust. You will never be forgotten.*

*In memory of the heroic Christians who risked the lives of their families to save Jews from certain death.*





*“Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted, the indifference of those who should have known better, the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most, that has made it possible for evil to triumph.”*

— HAILE SELASSIE



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My gratitude and love to the Hav for thirty-six-plus years of genuine friendship and your encouragement to write this book. Genuine friends are hard to find—they are precious when you do!

My best wishes to my brother, Benjamin, who was nine months old when he and our parents left the destruction of Europe and came to America. His early years were spent in a tough neighborhood while our parents struggled to build a new life. He persevered and became a world-acclaimed academic. Today, he battles Parkinson's disease. My thoughts and prayers will always be with him.



## PREFACE

On November 1, 1942, my mother, Rochal Gritzak, was fourteen years old, living with her family in Sokoly, a small village in Poland. The Germans had just announced the liquidation (the large-scale transport of Jews to death camps) of the Jews of Sokoly. Her father planned the family's escape as the liquidation of the ghetto began. They had no idea of the absolute hell they would face. The betrayals. The miracles that would keep them alive. And they learned that even when surrounded by masses who embraced evil, the good of just a few is enough to make the difference for many.

On the night of January 31, 1943, a group of young people escaped from the ghetto in Pruzhany, Poland. Two people in this group were my father, Shmeryl Elman, age twenty-two, and my uncle, Yossel Elman, nineteen. Temperatures were below zero. Dressed in white linen to camouflage their appearance against the snow on the ground, they made a run for the ghetto fence in complete darkness. They quickly slid under the cut wires and ran for freedom to nearby forests.

There were fifteen men and three women in this group. They had made plans, dug bunkers within the ghetto, and stored a

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cache of supplies and weapons. A partially completed tunnel was not ready for the escape. Time had not allowed for the tunnel's completion or finishing other preparations. The liquidation of the Pruzhany ghetto was underway. It would take four days to liquidate the ghetto of ten thousand Jews. It was now or never to escape for this group approaching the fence. German guards shot at them as they breached the ghetto fence. They had already decided they would get through or die trying.

None of these people had a clue of what miracles and hell they would face after this attempt to escape. All they knew was that if they were to die, it would be on their terms, not Hitler's. They sought revenge, not survival. They had no idea of the collective impact of their efforts. They changed the course of a war, the course of history. One by one, they showed the world that the human spirit is a powerful force, no matter the odds.

I have captured the true stories of my parents' Holocaust survival as accurately as possible. Without hearing each individual account, one cannot understand the miracles and hell of hiding or being a partisan (a member of an armed resistance group fighting the Germans in World War II). Every survivor's story has two key themes: the absolute hell they faced and the countless miracles that kept them alive.

The children of Holocaust survivors are known as "second generation survivors." Most survivors lived by a "code of silence." This silence was meant to shield their children from the horrors of their survival, but it did the opposite. Their silence kept us always wondering about their past. The family members lost—our roots. We could see their emotional pain as much as they tried to hide it. We could not understand it. We suffered from our own scars, even nightmares. We did not understand why. We would always hear the slogan "Never forget" when the Holocaust was mentioned in the synagogue or public remembrance. But we always asked ourselves, "Never forget what?"

In the 1970s, the emotional and psychological struggles of children of Holocaust survivors had been formally discovered. While not born during the Holocaust, the second generation

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inherited a legacy of trauma through the behavioral patterns of their parents and their parents' silence about their trauma.

My father passed away in 1989, my mother in 2004. All my survivor grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins have passed away—all with their stories untold. If I did not tell their stories, they would be lost forever. And I would never free myself from always wondering. And even worse, my children and their children would never know our family history and their connection to the Holocaust.

Most survivors are no longer alive today. Holocaust denial is becoming mainstream. Fascism, even in America, is on the rise. For these reasons, these stories of survival must be understood and preserved.

Writing this book has been a personal journey for me, in ways I never imagined. Because the silent survivors of the Holocaust unknowingly passed on emotional scars to their children, those of us in the next generation have scars and demons in our heads that we have never understood, nightmares when we sleep that we cannot explain. This personal journey has helped me understand my trauma and my battle with depression. Through the telling of my family history, my story is also told.





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## THEN AND NOW

**M**y parents survived the Holocaust, as did my uncle and other members of my family. Most of my family did not survive. I am a first-generation American, part of the next generation of survivors.

My parents did not meet until after their liberation by the Russians. Their stories are both the same and different—the same as far as the horrors and atrocities they lived through; different as far as where they lived and how they survived.

I grew up like most in the next generation. Our parents kept their dark past to themselves. Their lives and experiences were never shared with or understood by their families. We grew up with no roots or history aside from knowing they survived the Holocaust. .

I have lived with questions that were never answered. What are my roots? Who were the family members who perished whom I never knew? What was life in Europe like before the Holocaust? How did my parents and other relatives survive, and what did that even mean? What did they experience and endure to survive? What was their impact on the course of the war? So many

questions I never dared ask my parents when they were alive. Questions they would not have answered if I did.

They wanted their children to believe their lives started with a clean slate after their arrival in America. The Holocaust was a historical event they would occasionally mention, something we would read about in history books. It never became personal. Beyond that, it was like reading about the Civil War and other wars. It happened.

When I was growing up, other families and friends shared their histories, roots, and traditions. When I was asked, my answer was always straight and quick: “My parents are Holocaust survivors from Europe. Most of my family perished. I don’t know much else.” (These three sentences would have made up the entire contents of this book if not for the research I conducted!) After I gave that answer, people would quickly change the subject.

To be honest, I did know a few stories, but just in bits and pieces. My father would talk to me about life lessons he learned from the Holocaust and sometimes about life as a partisan. My mother would never talk about it at all, and if she did, she would share her bitterness, not the details of what she lived through.

Most second generation survivors learned to stop asking questions. We understood our parents did not want to talk about it. They gave different signals when we brought it up. When we were young, the answer was always, “You are too young. We can talk when you are older.” When we were older, asking would create a sudden change in their mood. The looks on their faces became solemn, sad, or annoyed. They would respond, “You don’t need to know.” They would change the subject. Sometimes, they would be as honest as possible and say it was too difficult to talk about.

We buried our curiosity and our desire to know. Before we knew it, we were out of the house—adults and raising our own families. And then, our parents passed away. But the need to know was always there. There would be no closure in our lives as the next generation if we did not know their stories. I did not want to let my life go by without filling in the blanks of my family history.

I retired in 2021. Current events brought a greater sense of urgency to get the answers I sought. I witnessed the turmoil of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. The COVID pandemic continues to disrupt the entire world. The insurrection at the US Capitol. The “Big Lie” about the 2020 election threatening American democracy. Voting laws to restrict voting. Seeing millions of people refuse to do something as simple as wearing a mask to protect others or take a vaccine that could save their lives. Unarmed Black people keep getting killed by police for no reason other than being Black. Today, Americans live in a time when an entire political party is focused on power, control, fascism, and dictatorship.

The daily news highlights this growing hatred and fascism in a nation once known as the beacon of democracy and freedom. Our institutions are being attacked and delegitimized. The rise of antisemitism, racism, hate of immigrants, and hate for women and women’s rights are becoming new norms.

America is so divided that I do not know it anymore.

I felt worried and scared about the future as a Jew and an American. I started asking myself, “Is this what my parents experienced with the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party? Is history going to repeat itself? But what history?” I did not know what my parents and the other survivors lived through.

But I did know that it only took one political party preaching hatred and fascism to bring Hitler to power. Hitler failed with his first coup. He succeeded with his second. America has already had one attempted coup. Would there be another? People were forming militias and preparing for another coup. I was now scared. I told myself, “This must be how my parents felt. I must get the answers and stories now because it is no longer just the past. It could be the future if we don’t understand and stop it!”

So, I began the research. I started with a thick folder of documents my father had left. There was a box of pictures. I also found the Yizkor (memorial) books written in Yiddish for Jewish communities across Europe. I found a translator for all the Yiddish material. I searched the online archives of worldwide

organizations that kept records of the Holocaust. I reached out to other family members, most of whom are in Israel. I read numerous books, several of which contained specific information about my parents. Through all these sources, I uncovered more details than I ever expected. I corroborated most of the information to make the stories as accurate as possible.

I have learned that all stories about Holocaust survivors include betrayal, bravery, determination, luck, and fate. Each has situation after situation where death is beaten, not once, but hundreds of times. Each of them met miracle after miracle that saved their lives.

Holocaust survivors had a significant impact on the outcome of the war. They were not just “survivors.” My father and uncle were two Jewish partisans who fought shoulder to shoulder with tens of thousands of others to defeat the Germans in World War II. They saved the lives of thousands of Jews, Christians, and allied troops. The partisans blew up bridges and railroads, cut down telephone poles, and destroyed military transports. They wiped out German garrisons and killed German officers, all with unyielding willpower against all odds.

Most people, including myself, viewed the partisans as unorganized ragtag groups who hid in the forests and attacked the Germans. They started in that perceived image, but they grew into highly organized, well-trained, well-supplied fierce fighting groups.

The Russian-led partisan groups in Belarus were a significant factor in the defeat of the German army. Overall, they disrupted 30 to 40 percent of the German supply chain to the Russian front. The Germans also had to divert three divisions from the Russian front back to Belarus to fight the partisans and repair all the blown up transportation and communication systems. And once repaired, they got blown up again!

In 1944, there were 374,000 Belarusian partisans in total. About 25,000 were Jews like my father and uncle. From June 1941 to July 1944, Belarusian partisans killed about 500,000 members of the German military and their local collaborators. They

undermined and derailed around 11,000 regular German trains and more than thirty armored trains. They destroyed around thirty railway stations and almost 1,000 headquarters and garrisons. They blasted, burned, and destroyed more than 800 railroad bridges and nearly 5,000 other bridges. They destroyed more than 7,300 kilometers of telephone and telegraph lines. They shot down more than 300 airplanes and destroyed more than 1,300 tanks and armored vehicles and almost 1,000 weapons depots.

One highlight of the Belarusian partisan war against the Germans was the September 22, 1943, assassination of Wilhelm Kube, the leader of the occupation administration of Belarus. A woman partisan became a worker in his house and placed a bomb under his bed. She escaped and survived.

My mother, Rochal (Gritzak) Elman, went into hiding with her parents and sisters. Through determination, luck, and fate, they survived against all odds. Her father's long-term relationships with Christians made the difference for them. An honest and honorable man, he was a well-known leather and fur trader among Jews and Christians. He bought leather and furs from many Christian farmers in Sokoly and around the nearby city of Bialystok. It was not just business to Zeev, as he also developed many friendships with the Christian farmers. He would help them with interest-free loans when they needed money. He would bring food for their families, hay for their farms, and provide other supplies if they could not afford to purchase them. He helped the people he knew in any way he could. He rarely asked others for anything other than their loyal business and friendship. He was one of the few Jews well-known and respected by Christian farmers. Several of these farmers helped save the lives of Zeev and his family during the Holocaust. They did this at significant risk to themselves and their families. These farmers were part of a minority of Christians across Poland who did the right thing and saved Jews.

My mother and her sisters were very young and lost their adolescent years to the war. My mother was fourteen when it

started. When the war ended, she was seventeen, married to my father, and a mother at eighteen.

My research found less information about my mother and her family before the war than I could find about my father and his family. There was minimal information about my grandmother and her side of the family. I hope to fill this gap over time.

Each story talks about the suffering and conditions of pure hell survivors endured. Most survivors downplayed their bravery by saying their survival was due to luck, knowledge, and opportunity. I have concluded that they were courageous heroes. Their luck, knowledge, and opportunity are better defined as the miracles that saved them. Their stories of survival demonstrated that the human spirit can prevail under the most horrible conditions.