



# The Survivor With a Healing Wound

Uncle Anszel survived Auschwitz with a wound that never healed, but he never spoke of revenge.

by Ray Dabrowski

**M**Y UNCLE'S NAME WAS ANSZEL CYMERMAN. He was a Polish Jew, and together with my aunt Bonia lived in Łódź, Poland's second largest city. Aunt Bonia married him just after World War II, sometime in 1947. She was a widow then, having lost her husband, Marcel, in a wartime bombing raid in the middle of Poland. Wujek Andrzej (Uncle Andrzej, as we used to call him), was often reminded by pious Jews in Łódź that he married a *goyim*. "You should never be al-

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*Ray Dabrowski asks that this essay be published in memory of Gayle Saxby, a member of the Loma Linda University faculty of religion. This June, Gayle, only 31 years old, was tragically killed in a road accident in Greece.*

*Dabrowski was moved to write this essay after listening to Gayle teach a Sabbath school discussion class at the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Maryland. Gayle, a first-year doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia, shared with the class her first doctoral research paper. It explored meta-narratives by referring to the work of Primo Levi, an Italian Jew, and his recollections of life in a World War II concentration camp.*

lowed to officiate in public worship," some of them told him.

Somehow, he received a dispensation from a rabbi not only to pray in public, but also to "manage" the religious life of one of Łódź's surviving synagogues. His abilities to achieve the impossible, it seemed, was known around the town. In general, life for Jews in post-war Poland was dotted with anxieties. A remnant of some 3,000 survived the war. Only a few faithful revived religious ceremonies. Anszel Cymerman was one of them.

**W**hat was so special about my uncle was that the Cymerman home was always open to friends and strangers alike. Sabbaths were always special. You could eat until you weren't able to get up from your chair. You could even take a nap at the table. If this were noticed, my uncle would hush his voice—something he always had difficulty doing—and speaking in Yiddish or Polish, he would summon all to be quiet. Of course all this was only a gesture. We all returned to our normal volume, continuing to crack jokes about one

another.

Every Sabbath, Aunt Bonia went to the local Seventh-day Adventist congregation; Anszel went to his synagogue. It wasn't always like this. My parents told me that my uncle was once a member of the Adventist Church. His love for my aunt was obviously strong and he also accepted the beliefs of the Christian church. But the family disputed Uncle's pure motives in becoming an Adventist. One of the family cynics even said that Anszel became a Christian for tax purposes.

My uncle was an entrepreneur. After the war, he saw that contact with the Adventist Church could bring some dividends. "You all have all these contacts with the West," he used to say. "One cannot pass by an opportunity like this." His down-to-earth motives only confirmed his make-up—a skill to make money and make life enjoyable. He used to operate a succession of workshops making ready-to-wear items like stockings, sweaters, and slippers. He used to say, "Slippers are made for everyone. Sooner or later, even the tax people will come to buy slippers from me."



In the 1970s, I used to visit Łódź quite often. Ulica Piotrkowska No. 33, where the Cymermans lived, was a must stop. If one came on weekdays, one could see my uncle at prayer. He had the *tephilin*, or phylacteries, strapped to his forehead and arm; his head was covered with a *tales*—a prayer shawl. He swayed back and forth “singing” his prayers: “Yehi ratzon shenishmor hukkekha” (“May it be thy will that we keep thy statutes”)—words always included in the conclusion of the prayer. Soon after, the *tephilin* was taken off.

I often inquired what passages he read from the books of Moses or the Psalms. We then talked about them. Though his Bible knowledge was not deep, it was practical. He often referred to Solomon's Book of Ecclesiastes. He believed fervently that if you “cast your bread upon the waters, . . . after many days you will find it again” (Ecclesiastes 11:1, NIV).

He was a practical entrepreneur who believed matter-of-factly that it doesn't cost much to give. And Cymermans gave away things. My aunt made the best fruit preserves in the world. When we visited them, it wasn't easy to refuse to take a jar or two back to Warsaw.

Later it was slippers. Soon our whole clan was wearing Cymerman slippers all over Poland.

Toward the end of his days, Wujek Andrzej became quite serious about his religious life. He appreciated my interest in what it meant to be a religious Jew. With the evangelistic zeal of an Adventist, I made him uneasy once or twice when I challenged what I considered his lax Sabbathkeeping. Being somewhat an idealist, on one visit I even brought Abraham Joshua Heschel's masterpiece, *The Sabbath*, with me. “Listen to this,” I interrupted my uncle. “This is a rabbi writing.”

The seventh day is the armistice in man's cruel struggle for existence, a truce in all conflicts, personal and social, peace between man and man, man and nature, peace within man; a day

on which handling money is considered a desecration, on which man avows his independence of that which is the world's chief idol. The seventh day is the exodus from tension, the liberation of man from his own muddiness. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Referring to my uncle's business activities, I said, "You cannot break the Sabbath and keep it holy at the same time."

"I cannot stop them from working," he said, nodding in the direction of two non-religious Jewish workers sewing and trimming slippers. A stench of glue permeated the entire household. "Besides," he ended the exchange, "they are in the other room. They're not working where I pray."

Uncle Anszel's war tragedy was typical of hundreds of thousands of those whose road went through Auschwitz. During my school years, excursions to the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp site were often organized. But I never went along. I cringed at the endless reminders about the war, the similar stories told over and over again in school, on the radio, and in the newspapers. It was not so much a distaste for repetition as a helpless feeling that I could not do very much with the past. It was all too overwhelming. It was all full of "never forget it" and "forgive, but . . ."

I remember Uncle Anszel's brief story, a recollection covered with the blood of innocent family members he lost. It was a rare occasion when I managed to have him respond to my pleading to tell something from his story. "What happened? What happened?" I would ask. "It's in the past," he would often say. My mother recalls that he told his whole story only once.

Piecing together fragments of his account, I learned that in the summer of 1940 the Germans rounded up all Jews from Inowlódz, the hamlet where they lived, and transported them to the Łódz ghetto. They were not permitted to leave. It was the first stage of the

"final solution" of the Jews.

In Poland, the Nazi "death machine" was setting up a concentration camp near Oświęcim (Auschwitz). From the ghetto the Jews were shipped to the concentration camps and crematoria in places like Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka. Directly from the rail cars, millions, mostly Jews, were taken to their fate. Mass murders in gas chambers and cremation of the bodies in Birkenau began toward the end of 1942. Though largely covered with the nearly 50-year-old layer of sod, the ashes of some of those who were murdered can still be seen today.

As their transport arrived from Łódź at the Auschwitz railroad ramp, Anszel and his family were separated from one another. His loved ones were gassed immediately. Uncle Anszel survived.

After the war, his fellow inmates, Edward Kafeman and Towia Korczynski, filled in a few details about his journey from one concentration camp to another: a three month stop in Auschwitz (until October), another three

Adapted from Marc Chagall's "Jew in Black and White"



months in Kaltwasser (October-December 1944), three more months in the Larchen concentration camp (until February 1945), and finally his arrival at Dernauh, from which he was liberated on May 9, 1945.

My uncle was handicapped. At the beginning of the war he worked in a soap-making outfit. When a pail of boiling soap mixture tipped over, his leg was burned, and never healed. Forever after, he supported himself with a stick.

Somehow, my uncle reminisced, in Auschwitz his handicap proved to be an advantage. In the camp, he befriended a doctor who gave him menial chores in the camp hospital. Uncle Anszel would never say what went on there. When the Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated in 1945, Uncle Anszel was still alive, but his wartime wound never healed. I remember seeing it ooze the rest of his life.

I often wondered, after he had lost his wife and two small, innocent children, what permitted Uncle Anszel's tears to finally dry. What gave him hope when faced with the naked truth of losing what was once so precious? He would not talk about the darkness that comes when all seems to be lost. Was he always clinging to this tiny spark of hope, so evident in the words of the ever-present God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: "even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day" (Psalm 139:12, NIV)?

"The German people are good people," he used to say. Of course, as among any group, there are a few who give in to a desire to rule

over others. Those few, he admitted, make choices that, in turn, make them inhuman.

In her book *Stärker als die Angst (Stronger Than Fear)*,<sup>2</sup> Gertrud Staewen recalls the lessons from those who were persecuted. Staewen belongs to a small group of Germans who tried to help the Jews, but whose friendship all too often, in those most tragic moments, showed itself so helpless that it seemed fruitless.

She remembers going to bid farewell to Dr. Adelsberg, one of the untiring physicians and humanists who was to be taken away to

Auschwitz in one of the transports. "When I came to say good-bye, an overwhelming weight of helplessness, shame and despair moved me to erupt into a sudden bout of hatred toward our oppressors. . . . She hugged me and said, 'It is through you that I want to believe that in the end the last word will not have hatred, but love.'"

Staewen's testimony brought me closer to comprehending my uncle's attitude, when she related an experience which, as she said, "remains like a signpost to us in the ever present fight with the Babel tower of hatred among people and nations." She recalls that

soon after liberation we heard about three young Polish Jews who survived through the terrible martyrdom of Treblinka, Auschwitz and finally Buchenwald. They kept each other's courage with a singular thought, and only one desire: to live in order to revenge. We found them—one was a doctor and two were manual laborers, and took them from Buchenwald home with us, in order that they would regain some strength. One night, full of serious thinking and talking, one of them raised a glass of wine and uttered in a

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*In 1983, Anszel Cymerman died. He was 82 years old. My aunt Bonia brought me a maroon-colored bag in which my uncle kept his phylacteries. "He was so fond of you," she said. "He willed that after he died, I was to give these phylacteries to you. He said that you would treasure them."*

passionate, yet solemn tone: *I am drinking to freedom, to friendship and to difficult life.* Because after liberation, he said, when we only knew how to hate and think of revenge, our life was relatively easy. *It is easier to hate than to learn about friendship. So, may God help us, now, when life must be difficult, because we began to love a few people from the nation which had been our deadly enemy.*<sup>3</sup>

I had my own exposure to the war. In 1945, 70 percent of Warsaw was in ruins. The first toys I played with—even in the 1950s—were made of bullet shells. I hated the ruins that teachers made us clear in Warsaw, as part of the *citizen's duty* activities. I remember that we had to take a bus to Krasiński Square. We then reported near a truck full of spades, shovels, rakes, and wheelbarrows. Off we went to clear the debris.

Still, I could not bring myself to go to Auschwitz. I was 34 when I finally visited the camps. It was painful to be walking by the wire fence where once the electric current killed those who dared to seek freedom. Then I saw rooms full of personal belongings, toys, suitcases, glasses, hair—these had a presence of innocence mixed with evil. Why, why, why?

Without my realizing it, tears were running down my cheeks.

I could understand feelings of revenge. But from my Uncle Anszel there was a deafening absence of hatred. When he reluctantly spoke about the war, he never spoke about revenge.

How does hatred and revenge surrender to acts of generosity and friendship? I will never know. But I know one thing: Once there lived a man whose wound never healed; a man who, nevertheless, kept repeating, "justice belongs to God." That man was my uncle.

In 1983, Anszel Cymerman died. He was 82 years old. After an elaborate funeral service, at which I was asked to give a short reflection on behalf of the family and friends, my aunt Bonia brought me a maroon-colored bag in which my uncle kept his phylacteries. "He was so fond of you," she said. "He willed that after he died, I was to give these phylacteries to you. He said that you would treasure them."

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1. *The Sabbath* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963), p. 29.

2. From *Znak*, No. 419-420 (4-5), Krakow, Poland, 1990. Translated from Polish.

3. *Ibid.*