



Seventh Meeting – Josef and Chana (*née* Lachman) Kamil

Chana, a native of Krzepice, is the only daughter of Jakow-Aron Lachman and Pesia (*née* Pilcer). Her father was a jeweller and a watchmaker. When the War broke out, Chana was seven years old. She and her parents remained in Krzepice until 1943, together with four other Jewish families because, amongst them, there were specialist craftsmen whom the German Army needed.

Chana had not known my father - she was twenty-six years his junior. Nevertheless, I present her story and that of her husband Josef for two reasons. The first is in order to tell the story of a seven-year-old girl who was sent to the camps and was forced to carry out arduous labour. The other is Josef's silence, a silence which was prolonged for many years and which was, as mentioned already, that of many. Josef's silence continued until he revealed his difficult secret in an article that featured in 2007 in the local publication *Gal-Gefen*, which appears in Kiryat Ono.

Let us begin with Chana. As a girl of around seven, she was transferred to the Blechhammer¹ labour camp next to Wrocław. Afterwards, she was sent to Klettendorf [Klecina]. She worked in sorting clothes. Sometime later, she was transferred to the German air force bases, where she worked packing bullets into crates - a young girl who, like many other girls, was coerced into taking part in the war effort of the most terrible of all enemies.

Chana could not specify a timeline and on which exact dates she had stayed in each camp. She was transferred, according to the needs of the German conquerors, to Reichenbach, where she worked as a labourer in a textile factory and, from there, she was transferred to Langenbielau and then to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, until she was liberated by the British on 15th April 1945. Her mother, who had been with her in all the camps, did not make it. She died of typhus, a mere fortnight before liberation. As for her father, he was fatally shot in the course of the *Death March* which left the Blechhammer camp at the end of January 1945.

After the War, Chana set out on a quest the purpose of which was to reach Israel - a safe coast. After three months in an orphanage in the city of Bergen, Chana was moved to Sweden, together with a group of some thirty orphaned Jewish youngsters. After about ten months, the group boarded the Swedish ship *Kastelholm*, which sailed to the city of Lyons. From Lyons, they made their way to Marseilles, where they embarked on the ship Cairo to Haifa. They arrived in Israel in May 1946.

Chana stayed at Kibbutz Degania B. for about two years and, together with her friends, settled in the Negev, as part of the "11 points [in the Negev]" operation. She married Josef Kamil and, together, they decided to move to the centre of the country. Chana and Josef had three children, academics by education, and nine grandchildren. As of the time these lines are being written, they live in an assisted living facility in Ramat Efal.

When Chana said that she had been liberated from Bergen-Belsen by the British, Josef brought out a copy of the article which had been published in the local paper *Gal-Gefen*, as mentioned above, and gave it to me to read.

¹ [TN: Sub-camp of Gross-Rosen (Rogoznica), as were the camps of Reichenbach and Langenbielau which are mentioned below.]

Josef was amongst those who pledged, in writing, not to recount their experiences following the horrors of the War. Josef kept his promise for sixty years. Now, after six decades, Josef has decided to break his vow.

Josef was born² into a Zionist home and he has achieved all that he desired - to establish the State [of Israel] and to start a family. He belongs to a generation which did not make its dreams come true easily. His tale is also that of the life of the [Jewish] People in the past century.

During the course of the Second World War, Josef was sent to the ghetto in the city of Kołomyja, near his hometown of Horodenka (then in Poland, nowadays in Ukraine). Every month, a fully loaded train left the ghetto for Treblinka. Of the twenty-five thousand inhabitants of the ghetto, by the end of 1942, less than ten survivors remained - and among them were Josef and his parents, Mechel and Sara [*née* Kupferman] Kamil, and their firstborn daughter Jona³, who was also saved. His father Mechel was eventually murdered by the Ukrainians and his mother Sara was sent to the Belżec extermination camp, where she perished.

Josef recounted that, every time the trains arrived, he and his sister Jona scrambled to hide in the attic. His sister fell ill with typhus, and she recovered. One day, they heard the sound of explosions. From the attic, they saw that the ghetto was ablaze. Whoever managed to escape the burning houses was captured. No one was able to flee.

The Kamil family's house did not burn down, because it stood at the end of the street. Afterwards, they hid in a Polish woman's house. In return, they gave her all the family's possessions.

After being liberated by the Russians, Josef joined a training group which was preparing to make *aliyah* and become integrated into one of the *kibbutzim*. The members of the group lived a communal life, training for living on a *kibbutz*. They gathered in the woods near the triangle of borders - the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany - where they awaited the coming of the Jewish Brigade, which operated in cooperation and under the auspices of the British Army, and [when they arrived], they smuggled them into Belgium. Josef was in the last group that they were planning to smuggle [across the border]. Apparently, they were reported. The British military imprisoned the Jewish group separately from the others, in a camp in Germany near Hannover.

The conditions in the camp were unbearable. The camp also held German POWs, who harassed the Jews and stole from them the little bread which they received. After the Jews protested, the two groups were separated.

The group of Jews, which numbered some forty individuals, was detained there for around three months. They were taken out for questioning, with the purpose of extracting from them incriminating information about the men of the Jewish Brigade, who had helped the Jews cross into Belgium illegally.

The situation of the members of the group was so dreadful, that the military rabbi, whom the British sent to visit them, burst into tears when he met them. The rabbi decided to assist them and he contacted the British headquarters in Bergen-Belsen. He reached an agreement with them that they would be released in return for their silence. They promised not to tell anyone what had taken place in the camp. They signed a confidentiality agreement and were released.

² [TN: On 23rd November 1926; see "Josef Kamil" here: <https://www.ushmm.org>]

³ [TN: As Jona is invariably a male given name, it is quite possible that the author misheard this name. A similar instance occurs below, but there the name **Taube** is given in parentheses. Jona in Hebrew means "dove", as does Taube in Yiddish/German.]

Josef was hospitalised in Bergen-Belsen for several weeks, until he recovered.

As mentioned, only sixty years later did Josef break his silence and reveal to everyone, who listened to him, what was the real face of the British who, on the one hand, were among the liberating forces but, on the other, did everything within their power to prevent aid to the survivors.

Josef had the opportunity to feel the hard hand of the British once again, when he immigrated [to Palestine] as part of the *Aliyah Bet*⁴. The ship on which he sailed, the [S.S. Henrietta] Katriel Yaffe, was captured by the British and was detained for over a month before the Haifa beaches. After a month of waiting, the illegal immigrants were taken to a detention camp in Cyprus. Only after three months were they allowed to enter the country.

Josef arrived in Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'Sharon. He joined the Palyam⁵ and, following the UN decision on the establishment of the State of Israel, he served in the Fourth Battalion of the Palmach, which escorted convoys to the Negev and to Jerusalem. After the War [of Independence], he moved to Kibbutz Gevim in the Negev, where he met Chana, as mentioned above.

The conversation took place with both of them together, in a sometimes humorous atmosphere. In the midst of the conversation, they asked me, "What will we all gain from this meeting?" At the time, I did not yet have a clear response. I intended to publish the material, but I still did not know how I would do so.

We spoke a little about our families and about the resurrection of the Jewish People after the Holocaust. We were all proud of the national and personal revival, our children and grandchildren [and] in the achievements and successes. They told me about their son Michael, a pilot in the Air Force, who survived the crash of his plane and about the months of anxiety that passed until he recovered.

Sometime later, I met a man named Chaim Dekel (we are not related - we both adopted the same Hebrew surname, each for his own reasons). Chaim is the son of Holocaust survivors and he decided to contact the second generation of Holocaust survivors from Krzepice and to engage in reminiscing about his family members and in creating family trees.

Chaim Dekel, too, was an Air Force pilot. I told him about the meeting with the Kamil family and about the accident their son the pilot had suffered. Immediately, Chaim remembered Michael Kamil, who had attended the same pilots' training course as himself and remarked that he had been an excellent pilot who had progressed both in rank and professionally.

⁴ [TN: *Aliyah B.*; illegal immigration to Mandatory Palestine between 1933-1948.]

⁵ [TN: *Naval division of the Palmach, which was the elite fighting force of the underground Jewish army in Mandatory Palestine.*]