



Fifth Meeting – Fela Kopel¹ née Lachman

Shortly afterwards, I met with Fela - and I did not imagine that the meeting with her would be the most significant one and that her words would move me so greatly.

Fela, a cheerful and dynamic woman, welcomed us warmly into her flat in Holon. But she had vacillated in regards to the meeting, or so her daughters told me when we met at the memorial, to the Krzepice murdered, in the Holon Cemetery. Fortunately for me, they had supported holding the meeting.

Fela, as it turned out, had known my father well. Not only that - she had also been closely acquainted with his first wife, Chana Lachman. That was the first time I heard this name - Chana. It emerged that Fela, the lady with whom I was speaking, was Chana's cousin (Pinchas Lachman, Chana's father, was the uncle of Jakow Lachman, Fela's father). Besides their kinship, they were also excellent friends.

I had never expected this information.

Fela went on to recount that my father Majer and his wife Chana had one son, but she did not rule out the possibility that they had had two sons. [If so], she stated, both perished when they were in their early teens.

My eyes filled with tears. Natan's and my two brothers - our half-brothers - who at the time these lines are being written would have been about eighty, were murdered in their youth for no sin and there had been no one to save them.

Besides my two brothers, my half-sister - my mother's daughter - also perished, as I mentioned already. My mother did not speak about her. We did not even know her name.

At this point, I could no longer hold it in. A rush of emotions enveloped me. Silence prevailed, until I had composed myself. My passion did not go unnoticed by my wife Zahava, who accompanied me to all the interviews.

At the Ceremony for the Children of the Holocaust in Japan

In the first half of April 2013, with a group of friends, we went on a holiday to Japan. Our guide was Sarit Segal, whom we knew well from previous excursions. She excels in organising tours abroad and makes every effort to improve the original programme with additional content.

So, on our way from Hiroshima to Osaka, we passed through Fukuyama, where a site has been erected in commemoration of the one and a half million children who perished in the Holocaust. Otto Frank, Anna Frank's father, was the one who helped set up the impressive site, which serves as a museum and training centre for students and educators specialising in the Holocaust.

¹ [TN: Here, the author treats Kopel as the husband's surname, but henceforth, in the course of the chapter, he repeatedly refers to him as "her husband Kopel," which seems to indicate that this was his given name. We have as yet been unable to clear this up.]

There is a clear distinction between the roles of the director of the museum and the chairman of the site, who is one of the important members of the local community. This community is a group of Japanese people who have set themselves the goal of commemorating the Holocaust.

On the day on which we were passing through Fukuyama, the site was closed to visitors. Sarit did not give in. She made great efforts to meet the museum's director and to persuade him to open the gates especially for us. For this purpose, we were presented as teachers and instructors teaching the subject of the Holocaust. It was explained to the director that we had come from a distant country, which had been established following the Second World War with the purpose of taking in Holocaust survivors and that this was our only opportunity to hear about their activity in Japan. In view of these arguments, the director agreed to welcome us.

The gates were opened and the bus entered the yard. I was the first off the bus. Some fifty members of the community stood before me. The men wore black suits with matching ties and the women appeared in black evening dresses. There were also several children among them and all held Israeli flags and waved hello. This was too much for me. I was so overcome, that I went back inside the bus. I only alighted several minutes later.

Here, I witnessed a meeting of two groups - the group of Israelis clad in their tourists' apparel, conspicuous in their plainness and, in front of them, the Japanese, who had congregated in their best attire to welcome us and to be our hosts. We were surprised. We had only expected the director of the museum to arrive and, here, all the members of the community had appeared. I think that Sarit, too, was surprised.

We entered the site. The director explained the purpose of the centre to us and he emphasised the name of Otto Frank, who had helped found the site with one sacred goal - to immortalise the memory of one and a half million children who had been killed mercilessly and with unimaginable cruelty. The commemoration is done by passing information on to the visitors - trainees and students who are studying the fate of the Jewish People.

After a short visit to the commemoration rooms, we gathered in the lecture hall. The centre's director and the president of the community gave their blessings and held speeches. Sarit responded on our behalf and presented them with a modest gift. Together with our hosts and following their instructions, we performed a ceremony which included lighting candles and laying flowers.

Some friends could not contain themselves and burst out weeping bitterly. Each one mentioned those of his relatives who had perished. The ceremony was closed with a song by the community's girls' choir. They sang in Hebrew, and their singing moved me deeply.





In Fukuyama, at the Anna Frank Holocaust Museum, which was established to commemorate the one and a half million Jewish children who perished in the Holocaust

Those were difficult moments, which have been well-etched into my heart. My three half-siblings had been murdered. For the first time, I internalised this fact. And I told myself again and again that my siblings had died even before my birth and, here today, for the first time, I was participating in a ceremony in their memory, which was being held in a Holocaust memorial centre in Japan, somewhere between Hiroshima and Osaka.



I now sharply return to Fela. A few minutes had passed since I had found out from her regarding her kinship with Chana, my father's first wife and, then, she stood up and proudly showed me a few pictures of her family, among them a photo of her granddaughter, an accomplished tennis player, who is ranked first in her age group. More than anything, her eyes dwelt on a picture of one of her granddaughters embracing her daughters - Fela's great-granddaughters. She gazed at them lovingly, her eyes streaming with tears.



Right: Chana, my father's first wife, and left: her younger sister

In every meeting with Holocaust survivors, the same phenomenon is evident - an immense enthusiasm with the grandchildren and, especially, with the great-grandchildren. And no wonder! They, the remnants, did not believe that they would live to see it. They were brands plucked from fire and who came alone or perhaps with a spouse and a child, started a family, had children and began a new life. And when they show their family members, they are so proud and content - because the family and the descendants are the triumphant testimony of their victory.

Fela pulled out another photo from the album, which featured two women, and handed it to me, saying, "Take it - this picture is yours. The tall woman on the right is Chana, your father's first wife".

"And who is the other?", I asked. "Chana's younger sister", she replied.

I stared at it in disbelief. I was holding a photo which was physical and tangible evidence pertaining to my family in pre-War era Kzepice. I felt that I was about to burst out weeping.

At this point, Fela began to tell me about the journey of hardships she had made at the end of the War. She had wandered from Poland to Czechia, to Hungary, to Austria and, from there, to Marseilles. Somewhere along the way, she met Kopel, her husband, and they came on the same ship to Israel.

In August 1948, they arrived in Israel and, immediately, travelled to Netanya to find Kopel's relatives who had arrived earlier. Fela was telling me that they had also tried to locate relatives in Haifa, when she added, "I see that you are uneasy. You must want to receive more details about your father".

"True", I said. "That is the main purpose of our meeting. I am still lacking many details, including my father's escape to Russia".

Fela nodded in understanding and went on to talk about my father Majer, who, as already mentioned, had married her cousin Chana, who was also her friend.

"Your father was a very impressive man", remarked Fela. "Everybody liked him. The Lachman family wanted him as a son-in-law. Pinches Lachman, Chana's father, who was my father's uncle, owned a large bakery, in which most of the family were employed - Zyskind, your father's brother-in-law (Chana's brother), managed the bakery and he was aided by his siblings Kopl, Jakow, Lajcia, Szlojme and Ruchcia. Pinches built the young couple a house in his courtyard. Majer and Chana had one son - I do not recall his name."

Her words surprised me very much. Fela, herself, had told me that my father had had two sons, who perished together with their mother. She had even given an explicit testimony to the Yad Vashem institution. But when I asked her about it, she did not respond.

"And what about the escape to Russia?" This, as I mentioned already, was a question that had been troubling me for a long time. I told her what Sandler, the hairdresser who worked for my father, had said. "All that you've heard is inaccurate", said Fela and explained, "Your father was not alone in his flight. A group of young people organised and they fled to Russia with the purpose of moving their families there. Among the escapees were also his siblings-in-law, the children of the Lachman family - Zyskind, Jakow, Lajcia and perhaps some other friend joined them. But they could not withstand the harsh conditions reigning in Russia. The dreadful winter and the slave work, which was forced upon them in the Ural Mountains, killed them of exhaustion. They all died - only your father returned after the War".

I mentioned to Fela the Kalman Chaskelewicz who appeared in the list of Krzepice townspeople who had perished. "I did not know any man by this name", she said. "I am unable to say that he was connected to your father's family".

At this point, a new surprise awaited me, when Fela said, "I know that your father had a sister. I think that she lived in Wieluń (near Krzepice). She sometimes visited Krzepice. I think that she was acquainted with your mother Miriam, even from before the outbreak of the War. As far as I know, she, too, perished".

While I was still digesting this new information, Fela began to talk about the fact that Krzepice, due to its proximity to the German border, was already occupied in the early morning hours of Friday (the first day of the War), as stated above.

"They didn't hurt anyone", Fela stressed, "but they firmly demanded from the residents that those living in two-storey buildings vacate the lower floor. They took out all the possessions, smashing up

the furniture and everything that was on the ground floor, in order to make room for the headquarters and the German soldiers. It was a frightful sight”.

Fela’s father, Jakow Lachman, was a cobbler by trade. His workshop was inside the house where they lived. “The Germans”, Fela recounted, “forced him and his workers, including my siblings, to make boots for them. Thanks to this, they allowed him to stay in town until 1942.

“Among the hundreds of soldiers stationed in Krzepice was also a Polish soldier - a mercenary. He carried an officer’s rank on his shoulders. Until the onset of the War, he had served on German soil. Being a resident of Krzepice, he knew the populace well. The Polish commander was stationed with his soldiers in my father’s house”.

Fela continued unravelling her tale. “One night, the Polish officer pounded on the room’s door. Panic ensued. To our surprise, he addressed us in Yiddish. He had probably learnt the language in his youth from his Jewish friends and he told us not to be afraid of him. He knew my father Jakow well and, as a token of his esteem for him, he promised to aid us with food and money.

“The Polish commander kept his word. He brought us products from which my mother was able to make biscuits. The Polish soldier was well aware that, should this be revealed it, would be detrimental for him, and he was scared. But even the little that he did do for us is to his credit.”

Fela said that the deportation of the Krzepice men to the camps already began in 1940. “The last of the residents, including all the members of our Lachman family, were deported in 1942 and were taken to their deaths in the extermination camps. A few individuals were transferred to labour camps”.

Fela, herself, was sent to the Parschnitz [Poříčí] labour camp in the Sudetenland. Every morning, she went to work in Trautenau [Trutnov] and so she survived. Fela told me about her cousin Uszer Sankowicz, who knew that she had been sent to Parschnitz. At the end of the War, he came to the Parschnitz camp and assisted her with the release process. Together with her, a large group of girls had managed to survive and were also released.

After Fela and her husband Kopel came to Israel, Fela located my father and renewed contact with him.

“We truly wished to form a friendly relationship between the families”, she related, “but your mother was opposed. I do not know why. Your father was a social man, who loved to have a good time and make merry. He came to visit us every Saturday, on his own. He was welcomed joyfully. My neighbour Gela, who knew your father from his visits to us, always rejoiced in his arrival and welcomed him with the exclamation, ‘Here comes the handsome man!’. He truly was a very handsome and impressive man”. Fela summed up her story, “All of us loved being in his company”.

