

**THE BOY WHO
SURVIVED
AUSCHWITZ**



Lerman, Adriana

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The Boy Who Survived Auschwitz

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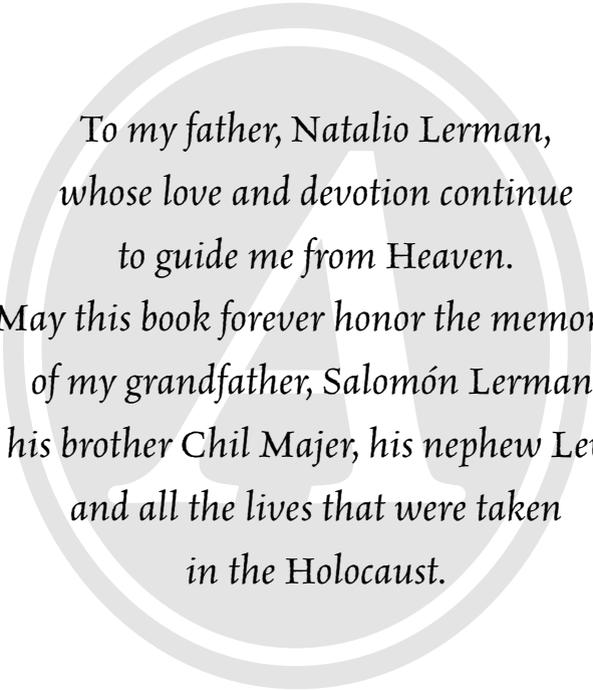
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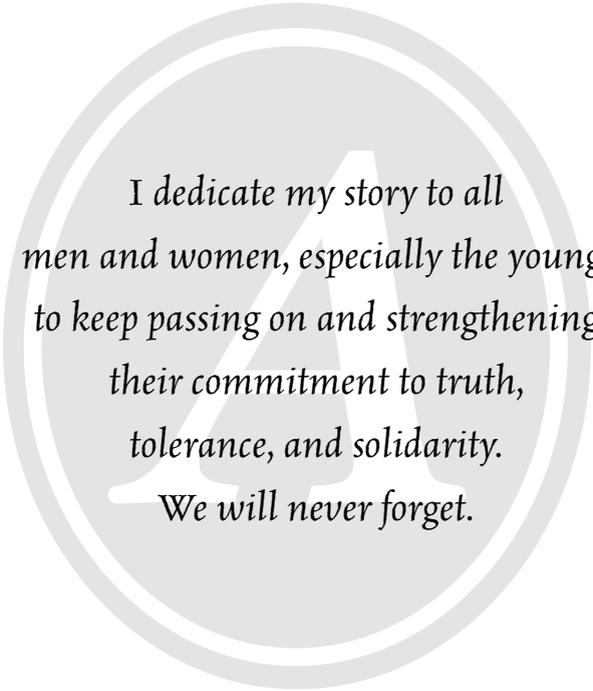
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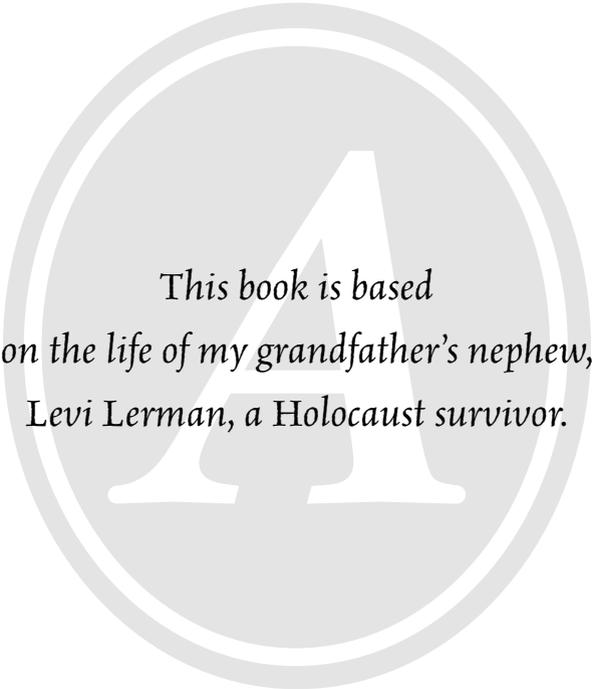
A *Editorial El Ateneo*



*To my father, Natalio Lerman,
whose love and devotion continue
to guide me from Heaven.
May this book forever honor the memories
of my grandfather, Salomón Lerman,
his brother Chil Majer, his nephew Levi,
and all the lives that were taken
in the Holocaust.*



*I dedicate my story to all
men and women, especially the young,
to keep passing on and strengthening
their commitment to truth,
tolerance, and solidarity.
We will never forget.*



*This book is based
on the life of my grandfather's nephew,
Levi Lerman, a Holocaust survivor.*

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Introduction

TRACING THE PAST

The Boy Who Survived Auschwitz is much more than just a book to me—it represents the closing of a cycle, the culmination of an effort to completely rescue my family’s history from oblivion. It is the result of a determination to unravel my origins, which began with the publication of my first book, *El dolor de estar vivo* [The Pain of Being Alive] (Editorial El Ateneo), and which I now consider complete with this reconstruction of a past that has remained buried for so many years.

It all began in 2020. With the help of my father, Natalio Lerman (Z. L.),¹ I immersed myself in the difficult yet exciting search for my family roots. Soon that journey turned into a frantic quest to discover what happened to my family during the Holocaust.

With determination and perseverance, I finally managed to unearth the past, revealing its hidden mysteries and secrets, and tearing down the impenetrable wall that concealed it.

1. Z. L. stands for *Zijronó li brajá* (Hebrew), meaning “May his/her memory be a blessing.” It is an expression used to show respect and to honor someone who has passed away.

Conducting the research and writing this book was a difficult journey that awoke many emotions in me, ranging from anguish at what happened, to admiration for my family's struggle and courage during that terrible Nazi era.

The story began in a small village in Poland, and it should have remained there, in the tranquility of a life filled with Jewish traditions and customs. But the lives of my family members took an irreversible turn, and they found themselves lost in a labyrinth of darkness and disturbance.

In this chronicle, I follow the challenging journey of Levi, my grandfather Shlomo Lerman's nephew. Together with his father, Chil Majer, he found himself caught up in the terrible clutches of Nazism, facing situations of uncertainty, fear, and pain. Yet he always clung to hope.

His story is marked by resistance and boldness, and teaches us a valuable lesson about love and survival, as well as the strength of the human spirit in the face of oppression and adversity.

Levi's voice emerging from these pages becomes a symbol for all those voices that were silenced by the barbarity of the Holocaust and did not survive to tell the story.

Adriana Lerman

Chapter 1

Year 1939: The German Invasion

MY FAMILY

I was born into a religious Jewish family on May 25th, 1925, in a city called Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski, located in the province of Kielce, in southeastern Poland.

It's a very long and hard to pronounce name, don't you think? That's why we just call it Ostrowiec.

The entire region is crossed by the Kamienna River, which is why there are so many swamps here. My friends and I like to gather on the banks of the river, swim, run through the woods, and jump the stagnant puddles scattered everywhere.

I usually go back home covered in dirt and mud, which makes my mother angry. She tells me to stop running around and start taking my studies more seriously. My companions in adventure are Yankel Borenstein and Chiale Kramer.

Although Ostrowiec is not a very large city, people say it is very important for Poland because of its factories and industries, especially those related to metal. But to be honest,

I hate to see the clouds of smoke constantly pouring out of the chimneys of Zakłady's steel factory, turning the city's sky gray.

My Polish name is Lewek, although no one calls me that. Everyone calls me Levi, my Hebrew name. At home, I am affectionately known as Leibele. My parents decided to name me after Jacob and Leah's third son, who later became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. The name Levi means "he who unites his people."



Levi Lerman in 1939, before war started.²

2. With the exception of those where a different source is provided, all images included in this book are original, taken from documents belonging to my grandfather Salomón Lerman and Levi Lerman (courtesy of his daughters, Mari and Susi Lerman).

On May 25th, I turned fourteen and celebrated at home with my large family: my parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and cousins.

We live at Rynek 22, in the heart of a predominantly Jewish area, right across from Market Square (a.k.a. Rynek Square), where fairs are held.

We live in a *shtetl*, a village with a large Jewish population,³ but there are also many Polish Christian families, with whom we coexist.

Near home, at the top of the hill, is our most sacred place: a great synagogue built of larch wood. Also, very close by is the Christian church. I avoid walking past it on Sundays, because on that day it is common for groups of young Christians to attack any Jews who pass by...

In fact, relations between Jews and Christians have never been good here. I first noticed this when I was seven and started attending a public elementary school (which became compulsory in 1928), where Jews and Christians studied together. Classes were held from Mondays to Saturdays, but we Jews did not attend on Saturdays, because that is our holy day. That's why we needed to find a non-Jewish classmate to lend us the lesson for that day—but that wasn't easy at all! Christian children didn't want to help us. Not only that, but they'd also mock us and our customs. Among

3. Before the war, in 1939, the Jewish population of Ostrowiec was estimated at around 11,000. Because of persecution and the Holocaust, there are currently no Jews living there.

other things, they would offer us pork, knowing we couldn't eat it. And they'd often harass us by throwing stones at us for no reason.

Over time, I learned to defend myself, since complaining to the teachers was useless. We Jews were always considered the guilty ones. If a Jewish child complained about a Christian, the teacher would simply reply, "Go back to your seat."

I was never invited to a Christian home. Parents didn't want "Jews" coming over. The same happened with the adults—and still happens. They don't get along.

In the afternoons, I attended Mizrahi,⁴ the Jewish elementary school, on Ilzecka Street. I enjoyed it there and, being quite popular, had many friends.

At thirteen, I started studying at Yeshivá Beit Yosef,⁵ just like my brother.

As for my family, my father is Yekhiel Majer Lerman, although everyone calls him Chil Majer. He is a very wise man, well-known in our village—many Jews go to him for advice, for guidance. I admire him so much. He is very patient and always has an answer, explaining serenely when I don't

4. This school was built in 1932. It was also a Jewish community center where various cultural events were held, such as Purim dances, Zionist gatherings, and more.

5. Yeshivá Beit Yosef was the religious center of the city, an institution for Jewish studies where the Torah, the Talmud, and other sacred texts were taught. There were more than two hundred students. It was founded by Israel Rosenberg and Rabbi Mordechai Simanovitz. Rabbi Mordechai, its leader until it was destroyed, was brutally murdered by the Nazis.

understand my school homework. He always makes time to talk with me, however busy he is.



Chil Majer Lerman, Levi's father.

My mother, Rywka Kestenberg, is a true *idishe mame*, an overprotective Jewish mother. She takes care of the house, my siblings, and me. She often says caring things like, “Bundle up, it’s cold,” or “Eat up, so you’ll be strong.” But when she finds out about one of my escapades, she doesn’t stop scolding me, and saying, *Oy vey*,⁶ *Levi, oy vey!*

6. Yiddish phrase used to express sorrow, frustration, or despair. It is often uttered as a sigh that sounds like resignation.

I have three amazing siblings. Yitzhak, the oldest, is very hardworking and responsible. He's a quick learner and always earns the best grades. Sometimes I feel both admiration and envy toward him, because my parents always speak proudly about how much he will achieve in life.

Hendel, whom we affectionately call Hendla, is my older sister. She is very hardworking and always helps my mother with the chores, especially in the kitchen. Together, they prepare traditional dishes for Shabbat,⁷ starting early on Fridays. On that day of the week, the delicious aroma of chicken soup and freshly baked *challah*⁸ fills the house.

Finally, Eidele—little Eidel—my younger sister, is the darling of the family, which is why she is a little spoiled. I often joke and play with her, pulling funny faces. We have a lot of fun that way.

7. The weekly day of rest in Judaism, beginning at sunset on Friday and ending at nightfall on Saturday. It is considered a holy day.

8. Traditional braided Jewish bread served at the Shabbat table and on Jewish holidays.



*Hendla Lerman, Levi's older sister, and her mother,
Rywka (Kestenberg) Lerman.*



Yitzhak and Eidele Lerman, Levi's siblings.

As for me, I'm considered the "mischievous one" in the family, the "troublemaker." I'm not as hardworking as my brother Yitzhak, nor do I have the skills of my sister Hendla. I'm always moving about and can't sit still for a minute! My parents usually say I have *shpilkes in tujes* (in English: "ants in my pants").

My uncles, aunts, cousins, and my *bobe* (grandmother) Malka live near us. My only uncle to leave Poland is Shlomo, my father's younger brother, who, tired of the antisemitic attacks, decided to seek a new life in America. He went to live in Argentina, and we keep in touch by correspondence. I dearly want to live near him in "the new world" when I grow up.



Shlomo Lerman, Levi's uncle.

WAR IS HERE!

I will never forget Friday, September 1st, because it was a day unlike any other.

That morning, we were supposed to resume classes after the long summer break. But incredible as it may seem, not a single school in Ostrowiec opened its doors. Not the Yeshiva, not the elementary schools, and not the *jedarim* (classrooms where children are taught the basics of Judaism).

It all began around noon, when the Polish national radio announced that German enemy planes were approaching Poland. The announcer kept repeating in a loud, alarmed voice, "Attention, attention, attention, enemy planes ahead!"

At first, I couldn't believe that we were really facing a war. I must admit, I even felt a strange excitement, I was curious and intrigued at the thought of witnessing a war up close. But when I saw the grave expressions on my parents' faces, I quickly understood that this was something serious.

But why would Germany want to invade Poland? For what purpose?

That very afternoon, we could hear the buzzing of German airplanes approaching and the distant echoes of explosions.

Many men began to pour into the streets, restless and anxious. Some held their heads in their hands, others prayed. Women wandered around, disoriented. Only the youngest children continued playing on the sidewalks, oblivious to the panic all around.

Others, like me, were just looking for an explanation that might shed light on what was really happening.

And as I tried to make sense of it all, to piece together my conjectures, I couldn't help wondering if the Germans would also reach our town...

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION: SEPTEMBER 1939

The Germans have come! Surprisingly, it took less than a week for German soldiers in their huge tanks to reach our village.

Since then, my father hasn't stopped complaining about the inability of the Polish air forces to stand up to the Luftwaffe (the powerful German air force). He also says the Polish army lacks modern weapons, which is making it easier for the Germans to advance rapidly and take over territory with virtually no resistance!

The Germans are now walking around our streets as if they own the place..., the same streets that just a few days ago were ours alone, and where I used to walk with my siblings and friends.

My father believes all this has happened because the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Germany,⁹ giving

9. The non-aggression pact between Germany and Russia, also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (after the foreign ministers who signed it), was signed on August 23rd, 1939. They agreed not to attack each other and to divide territories such as Poland, the Baltic states, and Finland, according to their respective interests.

Hitler free rein to invade Europe's countries and create the great German Empire, the "Third Reich."

This is so dangerous because he is now able to freely spread antisemitism and the absurd myth of the superior German race everywhere!

I find it hard to get used to the new reality: German soldiers are everywhere in their gray-green uniforms and tall, polished boots that make a deafening noise as they walk, armed to the teeth with large rifles and accompanied by threatening dogs.

My father is very concerned about the schools being closed. Some teachers are trying to continue teaching the few students they can manage to gather in their homes.

My brother keeps complaining, saying that he won't be able to finish his studies on time. So he has taken to studying alone, spending all his time locked in his room.

To be honest, I don't really care if classes start on time or not, but it makes me furious to feel we're constantly being watched. SS soldiers are everywhere, observing our every move. Don't they have anything better to do?

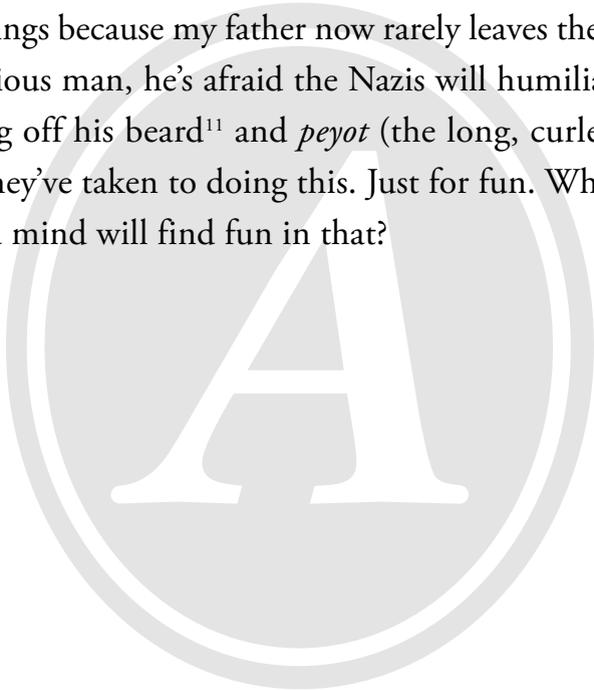
And to make matters worse, from the moment they arrived they've been looting our shops. They take everything they see: sugar, beer, brandy, watches, fabrics, hats, boots—anything will do. They especially like fur coats¹⁰ and anything made of leather and wool. I wonder what right they have to steal

10. One of the first measures taken by the SS was the confiscation of Jews' fur coats, with the threat of execution for anyone who kept any piece of fur at home. Baumstein was killed for this reason—for hiding a fur garment.

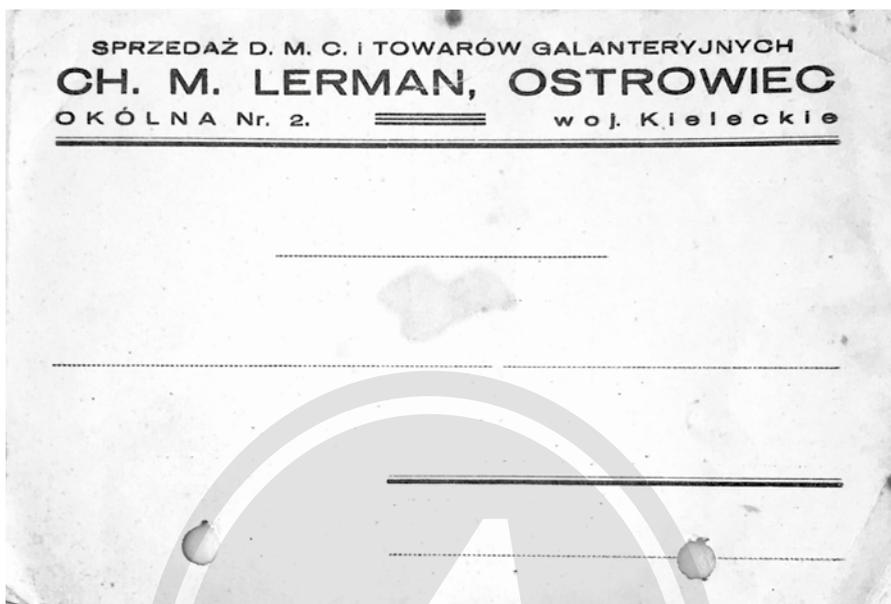
our goods. Is there anything we can do to stop them?

My father owns the haberdashery at Okolna 2, right on the corner across Rynek Square. The past few days, a German has been standing in front of the counter and, at the end of the day, he helps himself to a bunch of yarn—without asking or paying, obviously.

Lately, my brother and I have been opening the store in the mornings because my father now rarely leaves the house. As a religious man, he's afraid the Nazis will humiliate him by cutting off his beard¹¹ and *peyot* (the long, curled side-locks). They've taken to doing this. Just for fun. What kind of twisted mind will find fun in that?



11. A symbol of humility, characteristic of religious Jewish men.



*Card with the letterhead of the Lerman family's haberdashery,
written in Polish: "Yarn and sewing notions",
CH. M. LERMAN (Chil Majer Lerman).
Address: Okolna 2.*

In fact, some German officers recently stopped my friend Chiale's father on the street and cut off his beard. Much distressed, he picked up the fallen hair and kept it.

Chiale told me that his father then went to ask our rabbi what he should do. Later, when he returned home, he placed the remains of his beard in an envelope which he put inside a cupboard. Then he told his family that when the time came for him to die, they must bury it with him...

THE ARRIVAL OF EXPELLED JEWS IN OSTROWIEC: DECEMBER 1939

Lately, many Jewish families have begun arriving in our town, wearing sad weary faces and carrying massive suitcases and bags on their backs. What is happening? Where do they come from, and why?

My father explained they are Jews from the city of Konin,¹² and have been expelled from there. The Germans are claiming those lands now belong to them, and for that reason “Jews can no longer live there.”

What a ridiculous excuse! Why do Jews have to leave if Christians get to stay?

Fortunately, here in our village, a special committee was quickly formed to help settle the refugees and provide them with food. My father told the *Judenrat* (Jewish council)¹³ that we would take two refugee families into our home.

So now we share our home with them, as well as the food that my mother labors to prepare to ensure we all have something to eat.

12. City located in western Poland, in the Poznan region.

13. The Jewish Council, or *Judenrat*, was created by the Nazis. It was forced to carry out Nazi decrees and manage community affairs. It consisted of twelve members. In its first period, it was chaired by the lawyer Szajzel, with Josek Rozenman as his deputy. In 1940, it was led by Yitzhak Rubinstein and Mosze Alterman, and in 1941, by David Djament. They often requested contributions (money) or goods to bribe the Nazis in an effort to avoid certain decrees or discriminatory measures.

My father keeps saying that the Germans are simply repeating the same horrific antisemitic practices that monarchies used in the Middle Ages, and that with these measures they intend to seize our possessions and leave us destitute.

At the same time, many people resign themselves, saying repeatedly: “Better times will come,” or “If we need to endure, we will endure.” But why should we endure? I just want to go back to my life as it was before the invasion! Is that too much to ask?

