

## **The Presence of their Absence: A Personal and Film Journey**

Fred Zaidman, with Donna Kanter



Fred cleaned his great grandparents' graves and another of a great aunt at Radomsko Jewish Cemetery

### **Starting to ask**

Like many children of Holocaust survivors, protecting our parents from the pain of sharing with us their harrowing experiences and loss of family in the Shoah, was a top priority. That was my case.

As much as I desired to learn who my family was, I simply couldn't muster the courage to ask my parents until much later in life, the early 1990s, while filling out a questionnaire from the Red Cross. My father, Wolf Zaidman, was getting older and I was determined to find out if his brother Lejb was still alive.

Sitting with my father at the table, with my mother for support, I began asking the question that I knew would be very difficult for him to answer. He could barely talk and froze up, the pain of loss and memories were too much to bare. My mother coaxed him and repeated the answers that my father had whispered. It was the first time I learned the names of my grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

### **My family**

Of my father's five siblings, Lejb had escaped to Russia but my father didn't know if he made it there and survived. It was a family of eight from Radomsko, Poland, before moving to Bedzin in the Zagłębia region years later. I would learn eventually that my father's parents and two siblings were deported from the Bedzin ghetto and murdered at Auschwitz. A sister who had remained in Radomsko was

murdered at Treblinka. His younger brother, Mendel, was shot and killed in the Bedzin Ghetto. My father was the lone survivor of the Zaidman family.

My mother, Renate, nee: Kochman, was from Dabrowa Gornicza a few kilometers from Bedzin. Her parents were murdered at Auschwitz, and her youngest brother Tevya was shot to death at Gross Masselwitz Labor Camp on the day of liberation in May 1945. My parents met at Bergen Belsen and married soon after they were liberated on April 15, 1945. My brother Martin was born there in 1947 and I was born in Los Angeles in 1954, a few years after my parents had settled in California.

With the basic information my parents had given me, I decided to spare them further pain and wait until they both passed away to start my research to learn what had happened to every member of our family. My parents both died in 2012, just five weeks apart. My mother was almost 100 and my father 98.



Fred's parents Renate and Wolf in the Bergen-Belsen, Germany DP Camp

### **Making a decision**

I began building my family tree from a tiny twig, essentially starting from scratch. I had planned to go to Poland for the first time to see what I could find. It was always my number one goal. I was determined that once there, I would be left alone to experience whatever thoughts and feelings came to me. That all changed when I met filmmaker Donna Kanter on Facebook. I was the first to respond to her post of her documentary film "Lunch", about a group of legendary comedy writers, including her father Hal Kanter. Shortly after, we discussed my parents' story of survival and my research to discover their history. A writer and student of the Holocaust, Donna was seeking a theme for a film about adult children of survivors and asked if she could make a documentary about my search. My immediate thought was no way. I didn't want a camera crew or anyone bothering me. But after consulting with family and friends who urged me to do it to honor my parents,

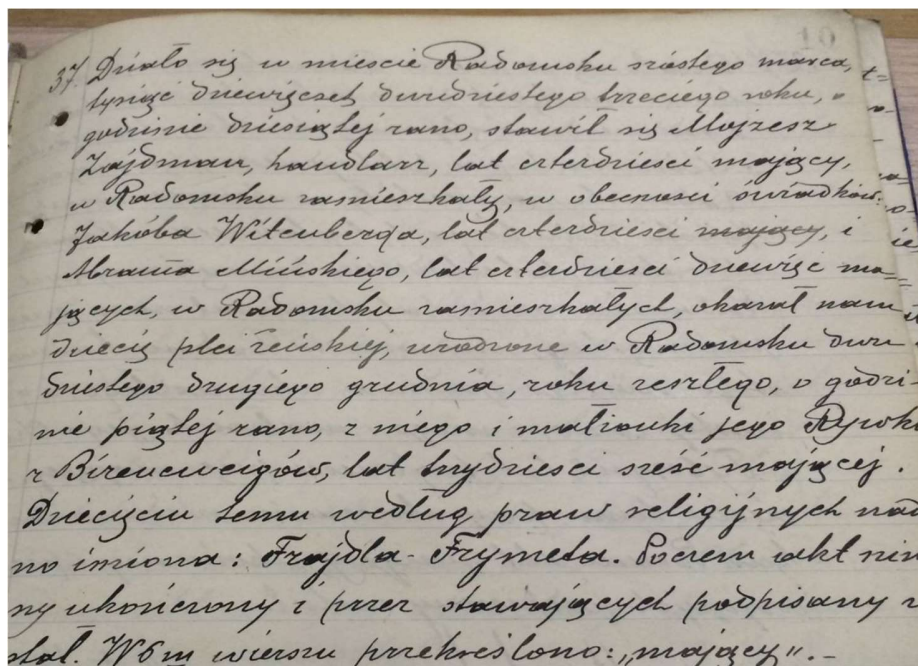
ancestors, and victims of the Holocaust, I said yes. And it was one of the best decisions I had ever made.

The first taping was an interview at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust in which I told my story before embarking on my journey to Poland in the Fall of 2015, camera crew in tow. I had help from two significant researchers who launched my search abroad: Genealogist Nancy Biederman in Los Angeles, and Bedzin Community leader Adam Szydlowski.

### Searching in archives

Shortly after visiting Bedzin, where my father's family had moved when he was still a boy, I began to focus with Adam on the deeper research I would have to conduct to trace the births of my father and one of his brothers in Zytno, and the family's subsequent move from Radomsko to Bedzin.

With Adam Szydlowski's guidance at the Radomsko Archives, I discovered my first documents - birth certificates for three of my father's siblings, including one for his brother Lejb! – with their mother Rywka Zaidman's signature on each of the beautifully preserved records. Seeing those first documents, I felt I had rescued part of my family from oblivion.



Birth certificate of Fred's aunt Frajda Frimeta in Radomsko, 1922

But that Fall in 2015, we learned that all other documents prior to 1915 – 100 years earlier before World War I and Poland's Independence - had been moved to state archives, perhaps Czestochowa, Lodz, or Piotrków Trybunalski.

Finding Dr. Dina Feldman on her engaging website, Jewish Piotrkow Trybunalski, Dina referred us to researcher Jacek Bednarek, who meticulously began seeking documents for me in all three of the locations. It didn't take Jacek long to get back to me with copies of birth, marriage, and death certificates. They included those of my father's two uncles, two aunts, one grandmother, two for his great-grandfather, one for his brother Lejb (which confirmed the document that we had found in Radomsko), and 13 cousins. I was flabbergasted by Jacek's efforts and discoveries.



With Jacek Bednarek at Rynk Trybunalski, Piotrkow

Two years later, after filming in Israel, and Bergen-Belsen in Germany, we met Jacek in Piotrkow Trybunalski on a rainy summer day, June 24, 2017. It was in a beautiful, quaint plaza that had once been the Jewish ghetto. A bronze plaque on one of the walls memorialized the Remembrance and Restoration Project: "On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1939, The Nazi Occupying Forces Established Within The Old Quarter Of The City, The First Ghetto In Conquered Europe For The Jewish Population Of Piotrkow Trybunalski And Vicinity."

After discussing our plans for the day, we stopped at a bookstore to look around and a smile came to my face as I spotted a book titled "Getto Zydowskie w Okupowanym Piortkowie - written by Anna Rzedowska and Dina Feldman. Dina Feldman!

Leaving the bookstore, we headed to the Plawno <sup>1</sup>Jewish Cemetery where my ancestors were buried where five generations of my family is buried (from the mid 1880s), but found in the desecrated graveyard only a few headstones and one memorial plaque on a small wall remaining from 1,200 matzevahs. Very disappointing as pre - Holocaust data, and some post - Holocaust data recorded

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<sup>1</sup> A village 10 km south of Radomsko.



893 Zajdmans and 246 Zylberbergs (the family of my great grandmother), for Plawno, Gidle, Klomnice, and nearby towns.

Our stop in Plawno did not produce my father's birth certificate, as Jacek and I had anticipated, but it was worth it to see Plawno's small collection and to learn from archivists that military and marriage records may still turn up in Czestochowa, Lodz, or Piotrkow Trybunalski with Jacek's guidance. One question mark remained from the visit: was my father previously married and did his wife perish? Jacek has an affirmative instinct about that, but we have yet to find any evidence. My father Wolf never spoke of a marriage, all records showing he was single until the day he was liberated in Bergen Belsen at age 28, and soon after married my mother Renate.



Fred and Jacek by the remains of the Plawno Jewish cemetery

The key to finding documents is in tenacious but patient research, even if it means making several trips to pinpoint where a family record may have been transferred. The key is to know the journey of one's family, to learn as much as possible from any letters or living relatives. If you are stymied by where to start, learn where a family was liberated or, sadly, where members perished. You can work backwards to life before occupation, concentration, and deportation in order to put the puzzle pieces together. Finding a researcher or genealogist in your family's ancestral town is critical. I don't think I would have been as successful without able helpers both at home and in Poland, Jacek Bednarek a generous and key guide in Piotrkow Trybunalski.

### **The movie**

The documentary that Donna Kanter produced on my journey is, "The Presence Of Their Absence, a title that describes the mystery of our experience and existence as adult children of Holocaust survivors. We tell our family stories for those who cannot. We have inherited the responsibility of a historical era that we must not forget.



Donna and Fred on location Dabrowa-Gornicza, Poland, 2016

We hope you will see our film when it is released internationally next year. Please visit our website: [thepresenceoftheirabsence.com](http://thepresenceoftheirabsence.com) and join us with your comments. We hope the film and some surprises will inspire you to go on your own journey. I guarantee it will be an experience you will never forget.