



My Search

Josef Ben-Eliezer





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IN THIS GREAT CONFUSION there are innocent people with pure hearts who are at a loss, shaken by what they see, who ask with pain and sorrow: “Where will our help come from? Who will guide us and give us an example through their life, by their behavior? Who can we follow?” Young and old search for true light with deep longing, wrestling with their doubts.

Natan Hofshi, Israeli pacifist (1889–1980)



Grandmother, Lena, Judith, Mother, Uncle Milech, Josef, Leo

Foreword

ON AN EXCEPTIONALLY TENSE DAY in 1997, I sat in my office at Bethlehem Bible College as violent clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian demonstrators escalated outside. The sound of heavy gunfire and the putrid smell of tear gas seeped in through my window.

But that's not why my hands trembled as I read a letter I had just opened. I have received countless letters in my lifetime, but this is one of the few I will always remember. In it, a woman named Channah Ben-Eliezer introduced herself as Josef Ben-Eliezer's daughter and shared some of her father's story.

As a Jewish child in Germany, Josef Ben-Eliezer experienced the Nazis' rise to power. His family first sought refuge in Poland, but was driven out when the Germans arrived. Josef fled eastward and ended up exiled to Siberia. He escaped and eventually came to Palestine, where he joined the brigades fighting to establish a Jewish state.

Their goal was to provide a safe haven for the persecuted Jews of Europe. Full of energy and enthusiasm, Josef found himself fighting with the forces that conquered the Palestinian town of Lydda, my hometown. (In this book, Josef refers to it by its Hebrew name, Lod.)

In her letter, Channah briefly described her father's account of the atrocities committed against the people of Lydda. The events of Lydda remain one of the open wounds in the relationship between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, as the majority of the town's inhabitants were forced to leave during the 1948 war. While this has been denied by many Israelis, reading about Josef's experiences confirmed what my father and other family members had told me.

For Josef, these events triggered flashbacks of being driven from his own home as a child – and started him on a lifelong spiritual quest for peace and reconciliation. This relentless search led him back to Germany, where he found brotherhood among a people that had committed horrible acts against his own people during the Holocaust. And now, decades later, it had led him to look for a way to reconcile with the Palestinians of Lydda and seek their forgiveness.

Channah's letter included a request. She wanted to help her father connect with people who had been expelled from their homes in Lydda. At the time, she did not know my family's story, only that I led an organization working for reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians.

This was a gift I would never have imagined – a man seeking forgiveness for an event that left scars and still very much affects the people of this land. I responded immediately to Josef’s request and arranged for him to meet my father, Yacoub, in Lydda. When Josef arrived, I watched as they walked through the old city together, sharing their memories of that day in 1948. Then Josef turned to my father and asked his forgiveness. Later my father told me, “I never believed that my story would be acknowledged by a Jew, let alone by someone seeking forgiveness.”

Some of the most difficult and challenging aspects in reconciliation initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians are history and narrative – what happened in this land, who is at fault, who started what, and how we choose to remember these events. For the Jews, there is the suffering and pain of the Holocaust and the discrimination they faced in the countries where they lived. For the Palestinians, the years 1947 to 1949, known as the *Nakba*, stand out in our memory, as many were uprooted from their homes and still have no nation to call home. All these events have left major scars that need to be acknowledged, understood, taken seriously, and addressed.

The story of Josef and Yacoub offers hope for all of us. It shows that once history and narrative are mutually recognized, there is indeed a way forward. It will require courage, openness, deep learning from life experiences, and a desire to move forward for the sake of a new

generation. But like these two men, who rose above their own suffering, we too can find freedom and healing through repentance and forgiveness. May their act pave the way for many in our society.

Salim J. Munayer, PhD
Director, Musalaha, Jerusalem



1.

Earliest Memories

I WAS BORN IN JULY 1929, in Frankfurt, Germany. My parents were Eastern European Jews who had come several years earlier from Poland. Unlike the Jews who had lived in Germany for generations, they knew little or nothing about its culture—for example, about Goethe and Schiller. Most German Jews were wealthier and better educated. They were also patriotic; they considered themselves part of the country's middle-class society. But we did not feel so much at home.

At the time of my birth, my brother Leo was already eleven and my sister Lena ten. So for a year and a half, I was the baby in the family. Even after my younger sister, Judith, was born, I received a lot of attention, because I was often sick. My parents had established a fairly comfortable living by then, so I was pretty spoiled as a child. We shared a house with several relatives from my mother's family, and I used to play with my cousins.

My parents had a kind of warehouse together with my uncle, Chaim Simcha. In Germany at that time, young Jewish women often used the income from their first job for an *Aussteuer* – a set of sheets, pillows and blankets, and maybe even a featherbed – for the day when they would marry. My father and uncle sold such sets of linens to be paid off in monthly installments. The business went well, and our extended family acquired several properties in Frankfurt. So we were fortunate that we had the means to escape Germany when the Nazis came to power.

My memories of Frankfurt are varied and scattered: an exciting visit to the zoo, dreadful throat examinations in kindergarten, and a fantastic candy shop around the corner from our house.

My first encounter with anti-Semitism was my mother's horror when I came home and used, in front of her, the expression *Dreckjude* – “dirty Jew.” As a three-year-old, I must have picked it up from playmates without understanding what it meant. A short time later, we watched from the windows of our house as the Hitler's S.A. (*Sturm Abteilung*, or “Storm Troops”) marched through the street singing, “When Jewish blood spurts from our knives . . .” More than my own fear, I remember the look of terror in my parents' eyes.

When Hitler came to power in January 1933, my parents were convinced that we needed to leave Germany. In April, Father went to Palestine to find a home for us there. We waited anxiously for news; eight months we waited. But in the end he could not secure permission from the British authorities for us to enter Palestine. He sent word that we should

meet him in Poland, because he felt it was unsafe for him to return to Germany. After a joyful reunion at the train station in Rzeszów, we made our way to my mother's hometown of Rozwadów, where we were to spend the next six years.



*Leo and friend, Josef and friend outside
their house in Rozwadów*

