

SAVED BY A JAR OF PICKLES: The Holocaust Escape Story of MICHAEL CZARNECKI (SARID)

**Written by Orna Hanison (née Sarid)
July 2023**

Pickled cucumbers. A lifetime of being my father's favorite food – it was the first thing he ate after a week of having no food whatsoever whilst he and his family were hiding to avoid the Nazis. But I didn't learn this story until many, many years later.

In 1964, I was 4 years old and moved from my native England to Israel with my parents and younger brother. My father's parents and sister lived there. In the apartment block behind ours lived a man who would go out to his balcony every afternoon and start yelling what sounded like sharp orders in German. My mother would hurriedly close our windows and usher me in, saying "Don't be frightened, he was in the camps and is not well". I didn't understand what that meant. When we walked outside everyone wore short sleeved tops as it's so hot there, and I saw many people with numbers tattooed on their arms. Again, my mother would explain "they're camp survivors". Whilst I was surrounded by Holocaust survivors in Israel, my own parents never spoke about their experiences. Although I knew they were both born in Poland and escaped during the war, I knew little more than that. Questions tended to be given short, unsatisfying answers and it was evident to me that this wasn't a subject either of my parents wanted to discuss.

My grandfather died in 1978 when I was 18, and my aunt five years later. When clearing out her apartment my father found a letter in a desk. The letter was from the Nazis, dated sometime in late 1939, informing my grandfather that he had to vacate his home and move to a new address by a specific date or there would be severe consequences. The new address was in the ghetto that the Nazis were creating in Warsaw. Finding this letter provided a small spark for my father to start telling us more of his

war time experiences. The full flame came much later, in 1995, when my brother and I went with my father to Poland and which triggered him to tell more of his story.

My father was born Michael Czarnecki in June 1931, in Warsaw, Poland. He had only one older sister, Rena though both his parents – Cesia and Ze'ev – had several siblings. My grandmother had three sisters and five brothers, and my grandfather had two brothers and two sisters. My grandfather ran a timber company and provided a comfortable living for his family.

The Nazis invaded Poland on 1st September 1939, when my father was eight years old and his sister was 11. My father's uncle Zigmund was the first Jew to be killed by the Nazis. He owned a shop that sold plumbing supplies on the corner of a street that was in what was to become the ghetto. The Nazis walked into the store and ordered him to come back the next day or they would come and find him. He was scared they would harm his family if he did not comply, but when he returned – with his wife hiding around the corner and surreptitiously watching what was going on – they shot him at point blank range, laughing. For the family this outrageous and shocking event foretold what was to come, and they started to plan their escape. However, before they could do that, my grandfather received the letter (that was later found in his desk) instructing him to give up their home and move into the ghetto. The day before the deadline he took his wife and children, together with two of my grandmother's sisters and their families, and all 11 people went into hiding in the loft of his office. He had once given my grandmother a diamond bracelet which they now broke up and used to pay for food and false papers so they could escape. Almost all the diamonds from that bracelet were used in payment, except for the three small stones that my Aunt Rena later had made into the ring you see in the photo, which I inherited when she died.



A woman from my grandfather's office helped them to stay hidden and safe and a Jewish Bulgarian diplomat helped them get false papers.

My Aunt Rena, at the age of 11, would hide loaves of bread under her clothes, walk to the ghetto and throw the bread over the walls to the Jews trapped inside. This was very dangerous, and she would have been killed if she had been caught. But there was little food in the ghetto and people were going hungry – eventually many died of starvation.

Three months after going into hiding the family had amassed their false papers and started their long, arduous escape. My father never spoke in detail about this ordeal. I know that they traveled partly by train but had to ensure there were no German soldiers traveling at the same time. They hid in forests. They walked for miles. They frequently had no food – often for days at a time. On one of those occasions a jar of pickled cucumbers saved them from starvation. My earliest memories of my father include him eating anything and everything on a plate, even on the plates of other members of our family if we left anything. Those terrible memories of going days on end without food left a deep mark on him that food could never be wasted. And of course, the love for the pickled cucumbers that saved him remained with him forever.

Their journey took them through Austria, to Italy, then Turkey and finally Palestine. On one occasion in Austria the Nazis boarded the train and ordered all the Jews to get off. On the train was a famous Rabbi - Rabbi Ger - for whom some American Jews had paid \$1M ransom to the Nazis for him to be evacuated. My father's aunt ran to the Rabbi to ask for help. The Rabbi, who knew he was valuable to the Nazis, told the Nazis he himself would get off if they didn't let the family travel with him, which they did. Their escape to Palestine took over 8 months.

The scars of my father's early childhood experiences in the Holocaust never left him. The 6 young cousins who travelled together to escape the Nazis stayed close for the rest of their lives. Their reunions were loud and boisterous as they retold their stories. They were the fortunate ones – they survived. The rest of the family did not.

In the 1950s my grandfather changed his name from Czarnecki to Sarid. In Hebrew that means “the remnant” as he was the only surviving member of his family other than his wife and two children - his parents and all his siblings perished in the Holocaust. Sadly, there are many Sarids in Israel, as our family's story is not unique, so many families were wiped out. I was – proudly – born Orna Sarid; only my brother and I bore that name. Now thankfully we have a new generation of Sarids who can continue to tell this story.



Photo of the
Czarnecki family c
1935, Poland.
Left to right –
Michael (my father),
Rena, Cesia, Ze'ev



1995 - My father and I outside my grandfather's office in Warsaw, where the family hid for 3 months after the Nazi invasion.

Orna Hanison

