



# Paul Matasovski, The Man of The Underground

by Paul B. James

## Introduction: How Hitler Changed European Jewry

The prophetic words of German poet Heinrich Heine, spoken nearly one hundred years before the Shoah (Holocaust) Hebrew for catastrophe, I prefer to use this lesser known but more accurate definition for what the Jews went through during WWII (,), came frightfully to fruition: “[w]here one burns books, one will, in the end, burn people.” (Heine 1823). How abhorrent it is that Adolph Hitler accomplished both; along with Heine’s books, thousands more like them, also, considered degenerate volumes of trash, were burned by the Nazis. Just as Heine wrote, people did in fact follow.

The National Socialist Workers’ Party Hitler drafted a document in 1920 that revealed his Hitler’s plan to rule Germany as a dictator; the published program became known as “Hitler’s Twenty Five Points.” In this document, Hitler forged his plan for “liberating” Germany from the “evil” forces besetting it, especially the Jews. The anti-Semitic ideology outlined in this document would soon spread across Europe. Only a minority of Jewish people, however, heeded his prophetic and caustic warning and left Germany before emigration became impossible. For the remaining people of Europe, Hitler was dismissed as a crazy man who would simply vanish into history. This was not to be the outcome.

The “Twenty Five Points” is an example of how a foundation for action is first conceived in words. In Point number four, of the National Socialist Workers’ document Hitler stated that the Jew cannot be a member of the German race (Drexler, Feder and Hitler, 1920 . In simple terms, all it took for the Shoah to start was for the proper words from one charismatic person (Hitler) to be delivered to a mass of people that was looking for a scapegoat. Through Hitler’s rhetoric the masses were convinced that the Jews were the scourge of the earth and thus responsible for Germany’s plight, primarily economic stagnation resulting from the punitive measures taken against it after the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles

determined that Germany was solely responsible for the cost of the war and financial reparations must be made. The words that Hitler spewed would spark the destructive fire that did eventually consume European Jewry. The plan that Hitler conceived for worldwide annihilation of the Jewish people was further laid out in his book *Mein Kampf*. Yehuda Bauer pointed out, “[i]n *Mein Kampf* the primitive idea of a “Fuehrer-State” is hinted at: It should be neither capitalist nor socialist but a society of racial brothers manipulating the state machinery under the guidance of a charismatic leader” (84).

The Shoah resulted in the deaths of nearly six million European Jews. There are varying estimates of the number of victims depending on the source of information, but according to Columbia University Professor Michael Stanislawski, the estimated number of Jews murdered in Romania during the Shoah was 300,000 (278). This was approximately one half of the Jewish population, a number which had taken the previous 1800 years to get up to. This is a difficult statistic to try to understand: it took the Romanian Jews 1800 years to reach a population of 600,000, yet within the few short years of the Shoah, one half of the Romanian Jewish people were destroyed.

## One Man – Paul Matasovski

Paul Matasovski was one of the surviving Jews of Romania, and this paper will focus on how he was able to survive the nefarious Final Solution conceived and executed by Hitler and his henchmen. Paul Matasovski was born in Bacau, Romania in 1923 and was barely nine years old when Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933. One of three children, Paul is someone who was able to defy the odds by being on the living side of the remaining Romanian Jewish population.

After reading the biography for Paul provided by the U.S. Holocaust Museum, I found myself asking many questions that only Paul could answer. Some of the broader questions were: what enabled Paul to survive the atrocities of World War II? What was his motivation for survival? Did luck play a role in his survival? What was it that made it possible for certain Jews to escape Nazi persecution and live through the most horrific display of inhumanity in modern times? When I “googled” Paul’s name on the internet, I found his phone number and learned that he was living in Connecticut. I was floored

at the idea that I could actually speak to this man. I called him and said: "Are you the Holocaust survivor, Paul Matasovski?" We have enjoyed four conversations since that first tentative introduction. Our conversations serve as the basis for the bulk of this paper, which addresses Paul's life.

Paul is the eldest of three children, and remarkably not just he but his entire immediate family survived the Shoah. His brother Michael left Romania after the war and followed a circuitous path through France, Poland and Cyprus, before finally being allowed to immigrate to Palestine with his bride just before Israel won its independence in 1948. Michael and his wife had two daughters. The family moved to the United States in the early 1960's and Michael worked as an auto mechanic in New York until moving to Florida several years later.

Paul's sister Rose is seven years younger than he is, and was trained as an accountant while living in Romania. Rose and her husband emigrated to the United States in 1969 and now live in New York.

Paul and his wife had two daughters, who both live in the United States, and Paul himself is now divorced. Paul's parents Maria and Leonid lived the rest of their lives in Bacau. They both died of cancer; Maria was 74 years old and Leonid died at the age of 63.

Memories of celebrating Jewish holidays were emphasized in Paul's biography, with Passover being his favorite. As a fellow Jew, I wondered what influence this had on Paul and whether this contributed to his survival and the way he confronted adversity. The holidays such as Purim, Passover and Chanukah all have stories associated with them that feature tyrants who decided to try to wipe the world clean of the Jews. Haman, Pharaoh and King Antiochus are the respective evil people who tried with all their might to destroy the Jews, but to no avail. The Jewish people survived these persecutors, and Hitler too, and are still here and contributing to the betterment of the world. Paul Matasovski is one in particular who contributed greatly. What lessons, if any, did Paul learn from celebrating these Jewish holidays that may have helped him to survive?

The common thread in all these stories is that the Jewish people always maintained "hope," even while their enemies were following their agenda to destroy them. Is this what happened in the Shoah for people such as Paul? I asked him: "What was it that allowed you to survive?" He told me: "It was by not giving up," and "it was having hope that pulled me through those terrible times." Paul added that he had to take strength from his faith. When

he emphasized the importance of hope and faith regarding his survival, I was reminded that these are the lessons that are taught to everyone, including me, that celebrate the Jewish holidays. As the holiday of Chanukah approaches, Jews around the globe sing a song from Zachariah 4:6 which puts Paul's philosophy in a biblical context: "...not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit - said the Lord of Hosts". This is the attitude that has sustained the Jewish people throughout time.

When I asked Paul what he remembered about the holidays as a little boy, he told me that they gave his family much joy. For Purim, his mother would make Hamantashen (a sweet triangular cookie) and have a small party at home. Paul recalled that for Passover he would go to synagogue dressed in new clothes and get matzah (unleavened bread), which was baked in the large oven provided by the synagogue. There was a large Jewish community and voluminous amounts of matzah would be needed for the week-long holiday of Passover. These are simple, precious memories that Paul recalled from his youth.

### Romania during World War II

The political landscape of Romania had an enormous impact on all of the Jews, including Paul's family. In Romania, orders were given by General Antonescu that helped seal the fate of the Jews of Bacau circa 1939 (Kara, 94). Anti-Semitism moved into Bacau in full force and laws were adopted that changed the way Jews lived there. Following the Nazi template for eradicating the Jews, the public lives for the Jews of Bacau was changed for the worse. Jews from all levels of society were ostracized from their normal functions: children were no longer allowed to attend school, and teachers, doctors, and other public servants were dismissed from their duties. Paul confirmed that he and his Jewish peers were expelled from school in accordance with the above policy. Rationing of food became an effective weapon against the Jews when a publicly displayed edict allowed Christians to receive twice as much food as the Jews for half the price. Jewish homes and properties were confiscated and "Romanianized." Synagogues were turned into warehouses after being desecrated (Kara 94).

### Acts of Resistance in the Underground

After being denied the right of attending public school, Paul began to attend an "underground" Jewish community center. This center acted as a school and enabled education to continue, as well as Jewish rituals. There were numerous small towns and villages just outside Bacau that were served by

this secret educational forum. This school not only operated as a house of study but also provided a place to discuss the actions that people needed to take in order to survive. This school had a Rabbi and other Jewish teachers. Perhaps it was by clinging to the Jewish customs that Paul loved and cherished that he found the strength to continue living. Paul explained that in this school it was decided that “now is not the time to be passive.” This attitude of resistance is one of the ways “hope” was maintained.

Resistance became a vital part of everyday life; however this was not an option for all the victims. The people that could do something, did. Even though Paul was a forced laborer in a factory and remanded to a barracks for three years, he was part of the resistance movement.

The Romanian dictatorship following Nazi precepts recognizing the importance of cutting off the communication people had to the outside world; accordingly, all the radios were confiscated. Paul and a friend were determined to defy this order and they built a radio themselves. This was not a simple task, considering the fact that parts were extremely difficult to locate and it was a great risk to their lives to possess a radio. This small radio, which measured seven by ten inches, had to be dismantled after each time they listened to it; the parts were concealed during the day in different places. Paul described to me that they were able to get the BBC and one other station. The information they received had to be distributed covertly. Paul told me that they would simply pass on information “mouth to mouth” by saying “I heard someone say...” or “someone told me about the German forces...” They had to be cautious when passing on any information they gathered. Paul networked information in a variety of ways through the underground, giving people ways of understanding what was happening. Incidentally, the friend that built the radio with Paul survived the war as well, and went on to become a very successful electrical engineer.

Paul was arrested for sabotage in January 1944 and spent six months in jail. It was a terribly cold winter and his spartan cell provided no comfort. The absence of a bed or even a cot was even worse since he did not have a blanket or sheet; Paul was forced to sleep on the floor.

One might wonder whether it was worth it for Paul to commit acts of resistance, since the penalty was severe. Other survivors of the Shoah, however, have described similar small, but worthwhile feats of defiance. Primo Levi described a singular episode when he contaminated a German laboratory worker who treated him like a lowly animal, even though

he possessed a superior knowledge as a professional chemist. While ill with scarlet fever, he explained:

I believe it was the only time I have deliberately done something wrong. The analytical method I was supposed to teach her involved the use of a pipette: a sister of those to which I owed the illness coursing through my veins. I took one from the drawer and showed Fraulein Drechsel how to use it, inserting it between my feverish lips, then held it out to her and invited her to do the same. In short, I did all I could to infect her. (79)

People from all walks of life made conscious decisions to show resistance to the dominant forces of evil throughout the Nazi persecution. These actions may have been acts of violence targeting key figures in the Nazi regime, as was the case of the well-planned ambush of Reinhard Heydrich which resulted in his death. More discrete approaches included developing a radio in the hopes of obtaining news and information that will ultimately brought aid to the oppressed. The fact that Paul and his Jewish community decided to take action and not remain silent during the Shoah should inspire future generations to speak up when there are people oppressing others. The message is: Do not give up on hope. As the Holocaust survivor Aaron Elster mentioned, words are the foundation for hate and we must act upon these words before they manifest into a mentality that is on a collision course with a group of vulnerable victims (2007). Elster mentioned in a video I caught on YouTube: “Words can be the beginning of serious problems”.

#### The Aftermath

The Soviet Red Army came through Romania in June of 1945 and by then Paul had been released from prison. Upon liberation, Bacau was desolate and ravaged by the spoils of war. There were fires burning out of control and people were looting whatever goods were available. Quickly, people began to organize and take control of the city; a mayor was appointed and civil servants were employed to maintain order. Paul took control of bringing back order to the streets of Bacau. He organized the young people into groups that cleared the roads of rubbish and helped regain the infrastructure. The experience he had from helping to rebuild Bacau guided him toward becoming a civil engineer. He went to study in Bucharest for five years and received his Bachelors' Degree in Engineering. SOMETHING. He moved to Lenigrad for an additional two years in order to get his Masters' Degree in Civil Engineering

SOMETHING. Upon returning to Bucharest he developed pre-fabricated homes, and was kept busy designing new methods of construction.

It was difficult for Paul to leave Romania, since he was a civil engineer and Romania was in great need of able people to continue rebuilding the country. In 1972, Paul was finally granted a visa and emigrated to the United States, joining his siblings in New York. The transition was not easy and there were obstacles that he would need to overcome.

Language was the paramount hindrance for Paul in finding employment. There was no way that he could work as a civil engineer if he did not speak English. This did not stop Paul from accomplishing what he set out to do. Paul found work as a draftsman, since this was something that he could do that did not require great verbal skill, and he worked at this position for two years. It was during this time that he also learned to speak English and was able to move up in rank. Once fluent in English, Paul finally found work as a civil engineer.

During Paul's career it seemed as if he would never stop moving around. His work took him all over the place, from New York to Providence, Rhode Island to Italy and then back to the United States. Shortly after coming back to the U.S. he was hired to work on building subway systems in Atlanta, and then Los Angeles. He was part of the underground during the war in Romania and he earned his living as a civil engineer by working, this time literally, underground. I like to say that Paul is the "Man of the Underground." Over the several times I spoke with Paul for this paper, it was apparent to me that he still is a man on the go. Most times when I called him he was either driving to the airport to pick up a friend or going to a study session at his temple. When I asked him: "What was it that helped you survive the Shoah?" he told me "I never gave up on hope". This is the foundation for survival that the Jewish people have maintained from the very beginning. As the holiday of Chanukah approaches, I will be reminded of my newly found friend Paul Matasovski and the gift of words that he gave me: "If you have the will to accomplish something, you will accomplish something!"

#### Conclusion – Never Again!

Today, survivors of the Shoah such as Paul Matasovski, Aaron Elster, and my friend Margit Feldman, continue to share their experiences in order to remind people that we must avoid reliving the tragedy of the Shoah by every means possible. As G-d said to Noach in the Torah: "Never again shall I doom the earth because of man" (Genesis 9:21). These

two words, "never again," have become a reminder from Shoah survivors that it is a responsibility among human beings to take care of each other, and by all means to dismantle hatred before it can manifest into the destruction of human flesh, especially when motivated by claims of racial superiority.

I am truly grateful for the privilege to get to know Paul Matasovski.

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